Managers Managing Stress at Work: Exploring the experiences of managers managing employee stress in the social housing sector

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Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration by Matthew Parkyn

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The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award from this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Signature: 

Date: 20th July 2019

Abstract

This research has explored how seventeen middle managers in the social housing sector manage employee stress and the reasons they take the approach they do. The research has been conducted in response to the increased prevalence of workplace stress. While workplace stress and mental well-being continues to rise up the political and business agenda; the most recent statistics from national and international organisations identify that the management of stress in the workplace needs to be improved. Workplace stress is a global issue for which the related direct and indirect costs are only beginning to be quantified, although the estimated cost of work-related depression in Europe is €617 billion per year. Furthermore, there is a trend towards devolving responsibility for managing workplace stress to individual managers. Despite their increasing responsibilities for managing stress at work, middle managers often lack the authority, skills and capacity to make the changes required to prevent workplace stress. Evidence suggests that middle managers are in a complex and challenging position between their superiors and more junior staff which can exposes them to role related stressors. The United Kingdom (UK) social housing sector is a particularly complex and vital one, comprising of a variety of private, public and charitable enterprises that build, manage and maintain housing stock. The complexities, political and financial challenges facing the sector expose middle managers and their staff to an increased risk of work-related stress.

This study adopted a constructivist philosophy, relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemological position. Semi structured interviews were conducted with seventeen middle managers working in the social housing sector in an attempt to explore and better understand how they approach managing work-related stress experienced by the employees. The findings of this study are that, in contrast to what the extant literature recommends, participants adopt predominantly reactive approaches to managing employee stress and deploy mostly secondary and tertiary stress management interventions. The study also found that the participants tend to focus on managing stress caused by workload, relationships at work and home-work interface. Furthermore, this study contributes new insights into how middle managers are managing stress in practice such as, using their personal experiences of managing their own stress and by observing the behaviours and practices of other managers. This study also highlights a number of contemporary stressors in the context of the social housing sector. These contributions provide new practical insights into how middle managers might more effectively manage stress in the workplace.

The need and focus of this research arose from the researcher's practice as an occupational health and safety consultant working with social housing providers across the UK. His work involves advising housing providers and their middle managers on matters of employee stress and health. Often this advice is sought when the employee is already unwell and

needs help to recover. This reactive approach to workplace stress is contrary to what UK health and safety (H&S) law requires and is known to be ineffective in tackling stress at work. The researcher's professional experience in the housing sector and the trend in devolving responsibility for managing stress at work to middle managers, provided the initial spark for this research.

Contents (overview)

Contents (detailed)

Glossary of Abbreviations

ASSET	A Shortened Stress Evaluation Tool
BSI	British Standards Institution
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CMI	Chartered Management Institute
EU OSHA	European Agency for Safety & Health at Work
HCA	Homes & Communities Agency
HSE	Health & Safety Executive
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOSH	Institution of Occupational Safety & Health
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SMI	Stress Management Intervention
RSH	Regulator for Social Housing
WHO	World Health Organization

Summary of doctoral elements table

Stage	Critical insights and developments
Level 7	Before joining the DBA programme at the University of Chester, I completed an MBA (with Distinction) from the University of Gloucestershire. Throughout my 17-year career in occupational health and safety and human resource management, I have achieved chartered fellowship of the CIPD and CMI and chartered membership of IOSH. Having experienced the world of work as an HR and OH&S practitioner and line manager I was acutely aware of the impact of stress at work and the ever-increasing HR and welfare responsibilities delegated to managers. With this and my experience as a management educator in mind, I set about exploring options to conduct doctoral research in to the experiences of managers in managing stress in practice.
Researcher & Research Development (RRD)	At the start of the RRD in September 2016, I agreed three researcher development points with my personal academic tutor (PAT). Each of these points is provided below, along with a critical reflection on my experiences at this stage. I developed my knowledge of research methods and theoretical concepts by attending monthly workshops and undertaking personal study on campus. While developing my research proposal, I developed an in-depth understanding of qualitative data collection methods and analysis techniques, as these are the most appropriate to the aim and objectives of my research project. Secondly, I developed my critical thing skills, as evidenced in my literature review and research proposal. I developed these by applying the learning from the workshops and working with my PAT during the process of conducting and writing up a systematic literature review and research proposal. I put to good use the formative feedback from the programme team to further develop my critical thinking and writing skills and refine the aims and objectives of my research proposal. Throughout the nine-month programme I started to identify areas of impact and key audiences, however, given the exploratory nature of my research these areas of impact and audiences would continue to evolve throughout the dynamic research process. The areas of impact and audiences became clearer as the data was analysed and are informed by what the data says.

Major Project (thesis)	This research is submitted in partial completion for the degree Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). During this stage there was the requirement to present to the annual faculty research conference and answer questions about the research proposal and project. Progress on to the research element of the DBA was dependent upon satisfactory completion of the taught elements (Researcher & Research Development Module). The research process has influenced my practice as an educator and trainer of those working in both organisational health and well-being and social housing. I have been able to incorporate both the wider literature and the emerging findings of this research in a new qualification I have developed in partnership with the Open College Network West Midlands on managing workplace stress and well-being. This regulated Level 4 qualification has been developed for business leaders, directors, managers, campaigners and people practitioners who want to learn more about proactively managing workplace stress as an organisational issue by developing and implementing organisational strategies. I identified the need for such a qualification while conducting this research as many of the training courses and qualifications available did not cover the strategic and preventative and approaches to managing workplace stress in any depth, focusing instead on reactive approaches to tackling individual cases of workplace stress. Throughout my doctoral journey I have been given opportunities to develop my skills as an academic and professional writer. These opportunities have included co-writing two chapters on managing workplace stress for the encyclopaedia of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and I have also written guest blogs and articles for several professional bodies and trade publications.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to Prof. Tony Wall and Dr. Scott Foster for your guidance, support and inspiration during this process.

Thanks also to Linda, David and Jon for your patience and encouragement. You have always believed in my abilities and driven me to succeed.

My sincerest thanks to the participants in this research who kindly gave their time and shared very personal experiences from their work as managers. Without them, the research would not have been possible.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to those who have lost their lives because of work-related mental illness or stress. Far too many lives are affected by work stress, and the way stress is managed at work must change. I hope this thesis will start a discussion and result in change in management practice.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This research has arisen from the researcher's own practice and professional interests as a health and safety consultant in the social housing sector. Over the past 18 years he has gained personal experience supporting managers and workers in tackling stress at work in high-profile, challenging front line services. In addition to his health and safety practice, the researcher is a trainer and educator of managers and other professionals in how to manage health and safety at work. Through his practice as a consultant and educator, the researcher has identified that more needs to be done to embed preventative approaches to tackling workplace stress. Furthermore, he believes that research is needed to explore the experiences of middle managers and enable them to play their role in tackling stress and improving mental well-being in the workplace (Crawford-Lee & Wall, 2018).

This chapter provides the background to this study in order to demonstrate its significance and relevance. An overview of the current challenges relating to workplace stress and the experiences of middle managers in the social housing sector are also provided, all of which were drivers when setting the key research aim. To position the discussion, gaps identified during the literature review have been summarised to highlight the importance of managing workplace stress – an issue afforded growing prominence in government and corporate agendas. For the avoidance of doubt, the terms 'manager' and 'middle manager' will be used interchangeably from here on to refer to staff who hold a management position in between their superiors and those workers reporting to them.

1.1 Middle managers and their role in reducing workplace stress

The role of individual managers is increasingly being cited as essential in managing stress at work (Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD), 2016b). However, it is understood that many managers have limited authority or influence over corporate factors such financial resources, policies and systems (Hales, 2006), thus highlighting the limits to

what an individual manager can reasonably do to remove or reduce the stress experienced by their subordinates. As an employee group, middle managers are positioned between their superiors and more junior employees, and are expected to translate strategic vision into operational activity. Middle managers have been described in the literature as being responsible for a function or department and positioned in the middle or intermediate level of an organisation's hierarchy (Uyterhoeven, 1989; Mintzberg, 1989).

The literature has described middle managers as having a challenging role, mediating between the strategic interests of senior management and having the departmental knowledge posed by front line managers and other employees, which can be further compounded by having little influence over strategic decisions that affect their work or that of the employees they manage. Studies have also highlighted that middle managers experience a number of role-specific workplace stressors and challenges (Pindek & Spector, 2016; CIPD, 2019), including (as described above) those relating to being responsible for operational performance with limited resources; having a demanding role with long hours; increasing responsibilities and remit and managing larger teams. It could be argued that being responsible for managing increasingly larger numbers of workers makes it challenging to provide timely and effective coaching and developmental support to staff that, as cited by Black (2008) and Stevenson & Farmer (2017), can be effective in reducing the impact of stress and mental health at work.

In contrast, it could be argued that their position 'in between' means middle managers are well placed to identify potential issues with organisational strategy, making their input valuable to the organisation. Studies indicate that middle managers are more likely to be effective in organisations where they are at the heart of affairs and permitted to participate in high-level decisions (Chen, Berman & Wang, 2017; Kanter, 1979), whereas other studies have suggested that this is the exception rather than the norm, and that when these organisational conditions are not present, middle managers can be alienated and marginalised (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Davis, Rensburg & Venter, 2016). Studies have also

suggested that organisations with poor management of mental health and employee well-being can experience high staff turnover and retention issues (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017) and that this can result in managers becoming engrossed in an ongoing cycle of recruitment and training – leaving little time for them to implement sustained operational improvements or enhance employee well-being and performance. Furthermore, many managers now work an additional 7.5 hours a week, or 44 days per year, because of the 'always on' culture driven by employer expectations and mobile technology (Worrall, Mather & Cooper, 2016).

As a means of reducing the impacts of workplace stress, it has been suggested that managers would benefit from further training to develop their competence in recognising and managing stress and fulfil their role in reducing the impact of workplace stress on the employees who report to them (CIPD, 2016b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2015a; European Agency for Safety & Health at Work (EU OSHA), 2015b). For example, further training has been recommended to assist managers in supporting and recognising staff with mental health issues. However, research by Eurofound (2014) has suggested that managers are already aware of the work stressors their workers and colleagues face: the research found that 80 per cent of managers express a concern about work-related stress – in particular when caused by time pressures and difficult customers or stakeholders. In addition, other research found that managers can lack the time, skills and ability to complete more complex HR well-being functions (Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH) & Management Today, 2019; Chartered Management Institute (CMI), 2017; Renwick, 2003) and that they would benefit from improved access to specialist HR or occupational health advice and support when dealing with complex stress and health issues (CIPD, 2019; Cunningham & James, 2001). The findings of the studies described above indicate that there are a number of organisational factors that will affect how workplace stress is managed, and that delegating more responsibility to managers along with further training is unlikely to be effective in reducing the impact of stress on organisations.

Indeed, organisational approaches to stress management are cited in a number of recent reports issued by national and international organisations (Holman, Johnson & O'Connor, 2018; CIPD, 2019; Health & Safety Executive (HSE), 2017; EU OSHA, 2015a) identifying that workplace stress is a major concern for both governments and organisations and is most effectively managed through collective, organisational approaches. This is supported in the literature, where there is an established body of evidence that supports the benefits of a preventative risk-based approach to managing stress at work which include: reduced costs associated with sickness, improved morale and increased productivity (Schnall, Dobson, Rosskam & Elling, 2018; Leka, Griffiths & Cox, 2005; International Labour Organization (ILO), 2016). The economic benefits of proactively managing workplace stress have been cited in several studies and reports which suggest that mental health issues are responsible for up to half of long-term sickness absence and disability among working-age people, which is having a detrimental effect on the economy, organisations and workers (HSE, 2018; OECD, 2015b). It is also understood that UK economic performance lags behind the other G7 member states (OECD, 2015b) with lower-than-average productivity levels of 18 per cent being attributed to poor management, costing UK employers some £84bn a year (CMI, 2017). There is an increasing focus on improving productivity in the UK, and it is in the interests of employers and the UK government to prioritise and invest in improving the mental health of the workforce and actively manage the issue of workplace stress (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017). In addition, HSE (2018) statistics indicate that the rate of stress and mental health problems among workers in the UK is the highest in 17 years, up 13 percent on their 2017 figures.

The methods that organisations can use to reduce the impact of stress on workers are known in the literature as stress management interventions (SMIs) – activities or programmes designed with the intention of eliminating or reducing work stressors and mitigating the effects on individuals (Holman et al, 2018; Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Burke & Richardsen, 2000). In their research on workplace stress, Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll

(2001) identify three types of SMI – primary, secondary and tertiary – and they concur that primary interventions based on preventative organisational approaches are more effective than secondary or tertiary interventions. Specifically, they agree that removing or reducing the number or intensity of stressors is the most beneficial approach for the organisation and individual, which further supports the notion that preventative approaches to managing workplace stress are to be strived towards (Holman et al 2018; HSE, 2017; ILO, 2016; OECD, 2015a; Tetrick, Quick & Quick, 2005). However it is understood that many employers do not have robust policies and procedures in to manage workplace stressors/hazards (CIPD & Simply Health, 2019; Eurofound, 2014), suggesting that, despite the guidance and tools available to organisations and managers to assist them in identifying and managing work stressors, they continue to take a reactive approach to stress experienced by individual workers.

While the notion that managers have an important role in reducing the effects of workplace stress is undisputed in this study, the points discussed in the preceding paragraphs suggest that workplace stress is an organisational issue and the approaches managers take when dealing with employee stress will be influenced by organisational culture and management practice. The evidence suggests that applying the principles of preventative approaches to stress management at work could be more difficult in practice than articulated in the policy, practice and scholarly literatures. It could be argued that these difficulties in applying theory makes the (already complex) role of middle managers increasingly challenging, and at a time when there is increased expectation for them to address the effects of stress on workers. Furthermore, the increasingly competitive market and economic climate with growing its emphasis on improving performance, organisations are demanding more from managers than ever before. These factors suggest that further research is needed to explore the experiences of middle managers in managing employee stress in an attempt to fill the gap between theory and practice in a range of organisational contexts and sectors.

1.2 Stress management in the context of the UK social housing sector

Within the wider global context of workplace stress, the UK social housing sector is a particularly complex and vital example, comprising of a variety of private, public and charitable enterprises that build, manage and maintain housing stock. As at October 2018 there were more than 1,600 social housing providers registered with the UK's Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). Increasing need for new homes, continued social reform, ongoing cuts in funding and demands for the sector to become more commercial all make working in social housing challenging. With increasing numbers of people requiring the services of housing associations, maintaining an aging housing stock and working with the most vulnerable people in society add to the challenges faced by those working in the sector. Social landlords are expected to meet the needs of numerous stakeholders, implement many key government policy requirements and at the same time endure ongoing budget and funding cuts – all of which increases the likelihood that those working in the sector will experience workplace stress.

The social housing sector operates in highly regulated areas and provides are range of additional services such as supported living schemes, care homes and drug and alcohol services, to name a few. As previously mentioned, workers in the social housing sector routinely work with the most vulnerable in society which could be a contributing factor to the increased levels of workplace stress being reported in the sector. A survey conducted by Unison (2017) found that 34 per cent of social housing professionals felt stressed much of the time, and that 79 per cent of those surveyed felt both stressed and unsupported by their managers. Another survey, conducted by Guardian Professional Networks Survey highlighted that the majority of staff in the social housing sector regularly worked long hours to get their jobs done (Kelly, 2015). The challenges facing the sector, coupled with the financial and political climate, provide a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of middle managers in managing employee stress with a view to informing the national debate and bridging the gaps between stress management theory and practice.

1.3 Research gap, research aim, question and objectives

While there is strong support and evidence for the notion that managers should become more involved in managing stress, there appears to be a disconnect between organisational practice and the theoretical approaches advocating preventative risk-based management of workplace stress. The literature highlights that the middle manager typically has little influence on strategic matters and has pressure exerted from those above and below them. Therefore while middle managers may seem well placed to manage workplace stressors at an operational level, in reality they may be powerless to take the kind of action needed to reduce or limit the impact of stressors in the organisational context. Indeed, organisational constraints are often cited as being a work stressor and are particularly prevalent in the current global economic climate. This can result in a lack of control or powerlessness, which could in itself be a significant work stressor for managers, exacerbating the situation. While providing further training for managers to be able to deal with mental health issues at work (CIPD, 2016b; OECD, 2015a; EU OSHA, 2015b) may be useful, sometime managers can be too close to the situation and lack the confidence to deal with these very personal matters – bringing into question whether they are the most appropriate people to manage such situations. It might be more effective and appropriate to improve access to professional advice and support for managers, individuals and organisations in managing workplace stress and mental health issues, however these professional support services are often scarce and currently come far too late for them to be effective (Cunningham & James, 2001).

Despite their complex and multifaceted role, there is currently little research that explores the experiences of middle managers in managing employee stress. Therefore, research is needed to understand how middle managers currently manage employee stress, and why they take the approaches they do. This is considered important in uncovering the realities of their world with a view to reducing the global impact of stress by bridging the gap between theory and practice. For example, if middle managers don't feel able to influence strategic

and organisational plans, they may opt to manage employee stress in a reactive manner by focusing on individuals who are displaying symptoms of stress – a course of action cited as being ineffective in reducing the impact of stress. While this study does not dispute the notion that middle managers have a role in managing stress at work, it proceeds from the basis that preventative, organisational approaches to managing stress are theoretically more effective and therefore should be advocated. As such, this study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge by researching the previously underexplored experiences of middle managers when managing employee stress in the increasingly complex operating environment of the UK social housing sector (Homes & Communities Agency (HCA), 2016).

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of managers in the social housing sector in managing employee workplace stress to understand how they manage employee stress, if indeed they are. A significant output of this research will be the development of an initial conceptual framework that will inform an agenda of future research and action (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) based on the findings of the research (Geertz, 1973). To achieve this, the key research question to be explored during this research is:

'How are middle managers in the social housing sector managing employee workplace stress, and why do they take these approaches?'

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Explore the experiences of managers in managing employee stress in the social housing sector. In particular this research seeks to better understand:

    a) How do middle managers approach managing the stress of others?
    b) What do middle managers do to help prevent stress in their position?
    c) What influences the approaches that middle managers take to preventing the stress of others?

2. Make recommendations based on the findings of the research, develop a tool to assist middle managers in the social housing sector in managing workplace stress and an updated conceptual framework to influence management practice, policymaking and inform a future research agenda.

1.4 Outline methodology

This research has proceeded from a relativist ontological position, which assumes that realities are personal (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), localised, experiential and socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The study seeks to explore and understand how individuals (in this case middle managers) see, experience and make assumptions about the world in which they live or work (Creswell, 2009; Stokes, 2011) and hunts for the meaning that emerges from the field of study (Stokes, 2011). Epistemologically, this research has proceeded from a subjectivist position in which the researcher can be an integral part of the research process, co-creating the findings with the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) on the basis that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions between the researcher and the researched (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

As the researcher is an active occupational health, safety and well-being practitioner, an inductive approach was adopted during this research. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 17 managers in the social housing sector to provide data that reflects expertise and experience with a local context from the perspective of individual managers who are affected by the way organisations operate (Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009). The rich and deep qualitative data collected during the interviews was thematically analysed to capture important themes in relation to the research question, present common/reoccurring themes and establish meaning from the data. This was achieved through ongoing familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing, coding, linking and revaluation of the data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson & Lowe, 2008) leading to the generation of concepts and theoretical frameworks evolving from the research (Quinlan, 2011).

1.5 Proposed contribution to theory and practice

The literature has long argued that a preventative, risk-based approach to managing workplace stress that focuses on the organisation rather than the individual is the most effective in reducing the impact of stress on organisations and their workers. However there appears to be a trend in organisations adopting reactive individual approaches to managing work stress. There is also an increasing trend in devolving responsibility for managing stress to individual managers who often lack the authority make the changes required to take action to prevent workplace stress. Furthermore, the middle managers' complex and challenging position between their superiors and more junior staff exposes them to a specific set of role-specific stressors. As such, this research proceeds from the basis that knowing more about how middle managers approach the issue of employee stress in practice and the reasons for their approach is necessary if the effects of workplace stress are to be reduced. This research will contribute to the body of knowledge by researching the previously underexplored experiences of middle managers in managing stress in the UK social housing sector. The significance of this study will lie in exploring workplace stress management in the social housing sector through the stories told by the participants with a view to contributing to the national debate and improving management practice.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature in relation to workplace stress and the manager's role in limiting the effect of this global issue. The chapter begins by defining workplace stress in the context of this research and introducing the role and importance of managers in reducing the impact of workplace stress. This is followed by an overview of the literature relating to specific workplace stressors and stress management interventions (SMIs), and the particular challenges middle managers face as a result of their position within organisations – in particular as a result of organisational change and as subjects of competing organisational interests.

The literature on workplace stress is vast and can at times be contradictory in its approach to the subject. For instance, there is a significant, established body of knowledge that examines stress from psychological (e.g. Kahn, 1990) and physiological (e.g. Cooper & Marshall, 1976) perspectives and there is an expanding literature that considers stress in relation to well-being (e.g. Hesketh & Cooper, 2019), thriving (e.g. Stevenson & Farmer, 2017) and resilience (e.g. Cooper, Flint-Taylor & Pearn, 2013; Johnson, Willis & Evans, 2018). However, this literature review chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive literature review in relation to all perspectives of workplace stress. Instead it sets out the particular theoretical position relevant to this research by exploring the management of workplace stress as an organisational issue and the middle manager's role in preventing stress at work.

2.1 Workplace stress and the espoused role of the manager

This section defines workplace stress and discusses the manager's espoused role in managing workplace stress within the wider global, national and economic context. A definition of workplace stress in the context of this research will be established, followed by a discussion of the literature on the manager's espoused role in tackling stress at work,

along with the evidence that suggests that what is expected of managers may not be realistic.

2.1.1 Defining workplace stress

Conducting research into workplace stress can be challenging because there are many ways in which stress can be defined and operationalised. As outlined earlier in this chapter, stress can be approached from a medical, psychological, behavioural, social or organisational perspective, each with its own definition, model and response to stress. Historically, workplace stress has been examined as an imbalance between a person and the environment (French, Rogers & Cobb, 1974) in addition to relational and transactional perspectives. The more traditional approaches to understanding and defining stress outlined above imply that it is the response of the people (or workers) to work demands and pressures that is the issue. This view of work-related stress is elucidated in the definition offered by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2010, para. 3) that stress at work is *"the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope*".

However, more recently, it has been the view of the ILO (2016), HSE (2017) and Cox & Griffiths (2010) is that the organisational causes of workplace stress are the issue rather than the worker's reaction to it. The notion that organisational and workplace factors cause workplace stress is reflected in the definition is adopted by the EU OSHA (2002, p.1) which suggests that *"work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the workers' ability to cope with (or control) them".* This definition recognises that the effects of workplace stress are "experienced" by individual workers and that stress is caused by organisational factors. The organisational factors that cause stress generally include poor organisation and allocation of work (e.g. how work is planned, how work processes operate and the ways that they are managed), because of poor work design (e.g. workers lacking control over their work and processes), poor leadership and

management, insufficient or unsuitable working conditions and poor relationships and a lack of support from colleagues and managers (ILO, 2016; HSE, 2017).

While there are many definitions and models of workplace stress, this research proceeds on the basis that UK law requires employers to prevent or reduce the organisational factors that cause stress at work. In light of the complexities in defining workplace stress highlighted thus far and the organisational focus of this study, the researcher has developed the following the definition of workplace stress that will be adopted while conducting the this research:

Workplace stress is a response which can be caused by organisational factors and demands that exceed a worker's resources or ability to control and cope with them.

2.1.2 The espoused role of the manager in tackling workplace stress

The manager's role in relation to workplace stress is seen by many as increasingly important, particularly as the issue of work stress has risen sharply up the political and business agenda over the past 10 years (CIPD, 2016b) and recent statistics from national and international organisations (HSE, 2018; CIPD, 2016a; ILO, 2016; EU OSHA, 2015a) have identified that the management of stress in the workplace needs to be improved. The OECD (2015b) and CIPD (2015) report that mental health issues are responsible for up to half of long-term sickness absences and disability among working-age people. The economic impacts of stress are far reaching and include reduced productivity; costs of health, social care and other issues associated with working-age populations that are too ill or unavailable for work (ILO, 2016). Workplace stress is a global issue for which the related direct and indirect costs are only beginning to be quantified (ILO, 2016). The estimated cost of work-related depression in Europe is €617 billion per year. These costs include those associated with loss of productivity (€242 billion), health care (€63 billion) and social welfare/disability benefits (€39 billion) (Matrix, 2013). Recent studies commissioned by the UK government

(Deloitte, 2017) estimate that the cost of poor mental health to the UK economy is up to £99 billion per year, with a significant annual cost to employers of between £33 billion and £42 billion.

If successfully deployed in the workplace, managers have the potential to contribute to reducing the negative impact and burdens that stress at work can have on organisations. These impacts and burdens are numerous and can include financial losses, legal action, reputational damage and low levels of performance and productivity. While the real impact and costs of stress can be subjective and intangible, it is estimated organisations/employers in the UK incur 19 per cent of the total cost of stress-related illness (HSE, 2015). There are also numerous 'hidden' costs of stress that can be incurred through high levels of workplace stress such as losses of knowledge, continuity and expertise related to staff turnover and absence. In addition, periods of staff illness can result in a drop in performance, employee commitment and morale, whereas initiatives targeted at preventing work-related stress have been identified as being more beneficial and cost-effective than doing nothing (Lamontagne, Keegel, Louie, Ostry & Landbergis, 2007; Noblet & Lamontagne, 2006; Di Fabio, 2017; Deloitte, 2017; Havermans et al, 2018). In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Stokes et al, 2018) organisations need to be resilient and able to *'weather the storm'* in the turbulent context of the working and commercial world. Resilience is now recognised as an important factor in workplace management (Hesketh & Cooper, 2019; CIPD, 2011), and organisations that do not consider or manage stressors in the workplace are likely to struggle in situations of crisis or pressure due to low levels of individual resilience. In an increasingly competitive market, the effects of stress and related ill health and can present significant challenges for organisations and reduce their resilience.

While the manager's role in managing workplace stress is increasingly cited as crucial in reducing the impact of stress on their subordinates (IOSH & Management Today, 2019; CIPD, 2016b; OECD, 2015a; EU OSHA, 2015b) little is understood about how managers address the issue in their practice. While managers may be well positioned to identify

potential stress issues in the workplace (EU OSHA, 2015a), spot potential mental health issues and have conversations with staff to help their situation (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development & Mind , 2011), it is unclear whether managers are best placed to address workplace stress and well-being issues. Studies have suggested that managers have experienced increases in workload and responsibility, taking on more human resource management (HRM) functions that were previously undertaken by specialist teams (CIPD, 2018a; Huusko, 2006) resulting in the responsibilities of managers becoming ever more diverse and fragmented (Brewster, Brookes & Gollan, 2015; Hassard, McCann & Morris, 2009). Other studies have also reported that managers often lack the time, training and capability to complete more complex HRM/well-being functions (Renwick, 2003; CMI, 2017), which could also be affecting how managers approach workplace stress issues when they do arise.

Several research reports on stress and mental well-being from the CIPD (2016a) and OECD (2015a) have recommended that more training should be provided for managers in supporting and recognising staff with mental health issues in their teams. However it is unclear whether providing training to managers alone, will result in positive outcomes given the limited influence and decision-making power of individual managers (Carter et al, 2014). Some researchers have suggested that managers regularly undertake their duties in circumstances of considerable ambiguity, and have limited authority or influence over the way organisations operate (Hales, 2006), illustrating that there is a limit to what individual managers can do to reduce the effects of workplace stress among workers. A report by Business in the Community (2018) on mental health at work found that 64 per cent of managers have had to put the interests of their organisations above staff well-being – further highlighting the complexities and challenges faced by managers. While providing managers with additional training and information may serve as a short-term strategy to managing workers' mental health, there is a consensus among many that the solution to improving workplace well-being in the long term lies with organisations taking preventative

approaches to managing stress (Hesketh & Cooper, 2019; ILO, 2016; British Standards Institution (BSI), 2011; Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001).

On a day-to-day basis, managers are responsible for translating organisational requirements into action (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Duguid & Goncalo, 2015), which in practice means managing employee workloads and demands, time and resource allocations along with other sources of stress. A number of studies have reported positive effects of reducing work stressors, like managing job demands and providing employees with control with over their work with job satisfaction (Fila, Paik, Griffeth & Allen, 2014; Schmitz & Ganesan, 2014) and reducing the negative health effects that employees suffer due to long hours and shift work (Lin, Liao, Chen & Fan, 2014; Rella, Winwood & Lushington, 2009; Salo & Allwood, 2014). Other studies suggest that giving workers control over their work, providing social and moral support, and offering interesting work in a safe environment are all known to have a diminishing the effect on work stress (EU OSHA, 2002). While numerous studies have highlighted how high job demands, low job control, low co-worker support, low manager support and a high effort-reward imbalance are predictors of stress-related disorders in organisations (Kinman, 2019; Nieuwenhuijsen, Bruinvels & Frings-Dresen, 2010), the limitations of these studies are that they have been undertaken from the perspective of the employee or organisation and not explored from the perspective of managers.

Leadership and management styles of managers have been reported as potential stressors at work as have links between the behaviour of managers and increased stress and ill health in the workplace (Gulseren, Thibault & Kelloway, 2019 LePine, Zhang, Crawford & Rich, 2016). In particular, negative behaviours displayed by managers and intrusive or close monitoring of an individual's work or performance have been cited as contributing to levels of pressure and insecurity (Suff, 2018; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). Role-related stresses such as role conflict caused by managers communicating incompatible expectations (intrasender role conflict) have been well documented in the wider literature (e.g. Johnson & Szamosi,

2018). However, role conflict and ambiguity stressors are reported to be increasing in line with the popular trend of organisations adopting agile and remote working practices (Nayani, Nielsen, Daniels, Donaldson-Feilder, & Lewis, 2018; Bentley et al, 2016). Negative relationships with managers and a lack of social/colleague support are discussed in several of the articles identified in the literature searches undertaken (Hewett, Liefooghe, Visockaite, & Roongrerngsuke, 2018; Avgar, Kyung Lee & Chung, 2014), however much of the research to date has focused on the behaviours and leadership styles of managers as experienced by employees rather than exploring the subject from the point of view of the manager or leader.

Links between the leadership styles and attitudes of managers and the health and well-being of more junior employees are well documented in the literature. In particular, it has been reported that negative behaviours and attitudes of managers can increase presenteeism among junior workers who are nor well enough to be at work (Nayani et al, 2018) and that where leaders were experiencing poor health (physical or mental) this was mirrored in evaluations of staff stress levels (Giorgi et al, 2015). These findings are similar to those found in research by conducted Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper et al (2010) which suggests that further exploration is needed to understand the impact of leadership styles on stress and strain in various work settings and occupational groups. A number factors could be affecting the behaviour and actions taken by managers, with studies finding that increased work expectations, organisational constraints and longer working hours are contributing to an increasingly stressful working environment (ILO, 2016). The ILO (2016) reports that the current turbulent economic situation and ongoing organisational changes and restructuring are contributing to stress at work. Other factors highlighted in the same report as having serious consequences for employee mental health include uncertain employment arrangements, reduced work opportunities, job insecurity and financial instability. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that managers (as a group) are also employees with their own needs and interests and that their role in implementing policy and strategy can mean they are as affected by these stressors as their junior colleagues (Hassard et al, 2009).

The evidence suggests that what is expected of managers maybe unrealistic due to their growing workloads, increased responsibilities and lack of time and training to fulfil their role – all of which can expose managers themselves to work-related stress. Similarly, developing senior/technical professionals into managerial roles can increase stress on this employee group, especially when individuals are promoted to line management roles without management training or development (Bolton, 2005; Gleeson & Shain, 2003; Holden & Roberts, 2004). Newly appointed and inexperienced manager are also prone to qualitative overload which can have negative impacts on the individual, their direct reports and other colleagues (Dewe et al, 2010). While Gilbreath & Benson (2004) suggest that the extent to which managers allow their staff control over their work has a considerable impact on reducing levels of stress and strain, managers may not have the authority or resources to allow their junior colleagues this level of control over their work, with middle managers themselves often bound by organisational constraints (Pindek & Spector, 2016).

Furthermore, how the middle manager's position 'in between' their superiors and subordinates has a bearing on how they manage and address workplace stress is currently underexplored in the literature. As previously discussed, middle managers as a group are subject to role ambiguity and role-based stressors as a result of their mediating role between their superiors and subordinates. The literature on management theory suggests that middle managers have a complicated relationship with their superiors and direct reports (Hiekkataipale & Lamsa, 2019; Andersson, 2010). Furthermore, middle managers play different roles due to their position within organisations, and could be under more stress at work than their superiors and their charges (St. Hilaire, Gilbert & Brun, 2019; Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). They are expected to simultaneously implement and respond to strategic direction by receiving strategy prescriptions from their superiors and then implementing them with the employees who work beneath them (Seijts & Roberts, 2011). As a result, middle managers can find themselves faced with conflict from those above and below. Middle managers are also expected to conform with the behaviours associated with

being a leader (e.g. assertiveness) which are incompatible with the norms and expectations associated with being a subordinate (e.g. deference). This could well be problematic as middle managers are expected to play both roles at work, which can be psychologically challenging for humans to achieve. While middle managers are likely to play a central role in managing workplace stress, the complexities of their position within their organisations could impact their effectiveness in managing work stress.

This section has summarised the relevant literature on the espoused role of managers in tackling workplace stress and argues that what is expected of managers may be unrealistic and that responsibility for managing stress is a wider organisational one. Therefore, more needs to be done to explore the experiences of middle managers in relation to tackling and managing the stress experienced by workers.

2.2 Managing workplace stress: perspectives and problematics

This section describes the nature and causes of workplace stress and discusses the stress management strategies, approaches and interventions that organisations can adopt to manage stress at work. It begins with an overview and discussion of the literature in relation to specific causes of workplace stress (or stressors), which is then followed by the management approaches, strategies and interventions that organisations can adopted to tackle workplace stress.

2.2.1 Managing specific workplace stressors

The workplace factors that can cause stress (also known as stressors or psychosocial hazards) have been defined as *"interactions between and among work environment, job content, organizational conditions and workers' capacities, needs, culture, personal extra-job considerations that may, through perceptions and experience, influence health, work performance and job satisfaction"* (ILO & WHO, 1984, p.3). Organisations have a moral and legal duty to protect their workers from psychological harm in the workplace. As described in the previous sections, taking a preventative approach to managing workplace stress is the most effective in meeting legal and moral obligations and is also economically and organisationally beneficial. Taking a preventative approach requires organisations to consider and identify stressors present within their workplaces. Work stressors (see Table 2.1) are varied and relate to both the content of work (referring to psychosocial hazards relating to working conditions and work organisation) and the context of work (referring to psychosocial hazards within the organisation of work and employee relations) (ILO, 2016).

Table 2.1: Categories of workplace stressors, adapted from Cartwright & Cooper (1997)

Stressor category	Examples of stressors
Intrinsic job factors	Workload, environment, work hours, technology
Roles In the organisation	Role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, responsibility
Relationships at work	Support from superiors, colleagues, social relationships, supervision, individuals' behaviour, leadership styles and beliefs
Career development issues	Job insecurity, under- or over-promotion, lack of achievement, personal goals/aspirations
Organisational factors	Organisational culture, management styles, hierarchies, bureaucratic structures, organisational climate, poor or negative communication, lack of participation, employee engagement and consultation, decision-making structures and processes
Work-home interface	Conflicting demands from home and work, family illness, relationship issues, caring responsibilities

While managers may be well placed to identify and manage the impact of intrinsic job characteristics (as a stressor), little research has been conducted into how managers manage this stressor group in practice. Job-characteristic stressors are often associated with individuals undertaking specific tasks that make up their job, along with the work environment and schedule/work times. There are strong links between a poor physical working environment and poor mental health (Kornhauser, 1965; Harvey et al, 2017; Peterson, 2018) including factors such as excessive/long work hours (Andersen & Westgaard, 2013; EUROSTAT, 2018) and physical strain. Work overload and underload are common workplace stressors that relate to the amount or volume of work that has to be completed by workers, both being associated with poor health and mental health among workers (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908; Hughes, Kinder & Cooper, 2019a). Work overload and underload can be quantitative (the sheer volume/amount of work required in the timeframe

given) or qualitative (relating to the individual's skills, capacity and ability to complete a task).

Incompatible (including multiple) work demands and workloads are regularly cited in the literature as resulting in negative emotional responses, loss of worker confidence and negative self-belief in individual workers, along with links between roles and self-reported psychological strain (Hughes et al, 2019a; HSE, 2017; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994). Quantitative overload has been linked to high levels of strain, anxiety, depression and decreased job performance/productivity (Cooper & Roden, 1985; Westman & Eden, 1992; Schiff & Leip, 2019). Quantitative work underload has been associated with boredom, lack of challenge and job dissatisfaction which are linked to anxiety and depression (Kelly & Cooper, 1981; Pindek, Krajcevska & Spector, 2018). When individuals are subjected to qualitative overload they can believe they lack the skills or capacity to complete the tasks they have been allocated, and can develop low self-esteem (ILO, 1986) and reduced self-confidence. Despite the evidence supporting positive outcomes of addressing job-characteristic stressors, little is known about the practicalities of managers doing so in practice.

The links between the number of hours an individual works and their mental and physical health are well documented, as are the links between the number of hours worked and stress/strain related symptoms, with those who regularly work long hours being more susceptible to ill health (Sparks, Cooper, Fried & Shirom, 1997; Hampton, Chinyio & Riva, 2019). Having little control of working hours has also been linked to work-related stress among workers (Härmä 2006; Loriol, 2019). The effects of shift work on individual health, well-being, and job performance have been subject to numerous studies, and associations between shift work and declining physical health, satisfaction and well-being leave some suggesting that fixed shifts are less harmful to employees than rotating shifts (Folkard, 1997; Seymour & Buscherhof, 1991; Jamal & Baba, 1992; Rothmore & Gray, 2019). Some employers, and indeed some employees, have a need or desire for shift working, for example in the case of the emergency services, which require some staff to work a range of

shifts. Some employees prefer working shifts, compressed or anti-social hours for personal reasons. There is a general move towards employers offering greater flexibility in working hours in order to promote a better work-life balance for individuals (Yuile, Chang, Gudmundsson & Sawang, 2012). It can be challenging to balance the needs of the worker and the employer and reach an agreement that works for both parties. The manager's role in handling such requests is crucial to the success of any change in work pattern, so they must be provided with the support, advice and guidance to manage these complex and often very personal requests.

The prevalence and consequences of role-related stressors were first identified in the seminal work of Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal (1964), which suggested that there are two primary aspects to role-related stressors: role ambiguity (a lack of clarity or direction in the role requirements) and role conflict (conflicting or competing demands). Setting individuals illegitimate tasks has also been found to increase the potential for role-related stress as it can increase role ambiguity and conflict. Research conducted by Bishop (2016) supports the theoretical assumptions that illegitimate tasks are positively related to stress and negatively related to satisfaction with work performance. While guidance from the ILO (2016), CIPD (2016b) and HSE (2015) suggests that managers have the potential to play a key role in reducing levels of role ambiguity, there are limitations in the existing literature about the management of role ambiguity, role conflict and work overload stressors in practice.

Role variables (ambiguity, conflict and overload) are feature regularly in the literature (Hughes et al, 2019a; Beehr & Glazer, 2005; Glazer & Beehr, 2005; Soltani, Hajatpour, Khorram & Nejati, 2013). Factors that are said to increase role ambiguity stress include a lack of clear information regarding the organisation's expectations of the role, guidance on how the role should be performed and a lack of direction/supervision (Schaubroeck, Cotton & Jenning, 1989). Various studies have shown a link between role ambiguity and high levels of psychological stress and strain experienced by workers (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994)

however, only two of the studies reviewed examined role stressors (Udod, Cummings, Care & Jenkins, 2017; Pinto, Patanakul & Pinto, 2016) experienced by managers highlighting that there is limited research that has attempted to examine how these stressors are managed by managers in the workplace. The limitations of the literature in this respect highlights that more research is needed to understand more about role-related stressors and the experiences of middle managers.

The manager's role in developing their team/workers means they could be well placed to identify and mitigate potential career development issues and stressors. Career development stressors were touched upon in several articles reviewed, however none focused on the management of career development stressors. This is not unexpected as Cooper et al (2001) suggested that this is one of the lesser studied workplace stressors; however, they point to a growing understanding and body of evidence that draws links with the perceptions (or realities) of a lack of career opportunities or development. It is suggested that job insecurity is a work stressor that is increasingly prevalent as a result of ongoing global financial and organisational changes and mergers which result in uncertain employment arrangements and reduced work opportunities for workers (ILO, 2016; Kozlowski, Chao, Smith & Hedlund, 1993). A study by Selenko, Makikangas, Mauno & Kinnunen (2013) highlighted that job insecurity can also affect individual workers' performance, which has an impact on other members of staff, service delivery and overall satisfaction and retention of employees. Dissatisfaction with one's career/career progress has been linked to job dissatisfaction and is a common work stressor (Doe & Reio, 2018; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). As suggested by Cooper (1998), further research is required to understand the complexity of career development as a stressor, specifically to explore how managers can address career development stressors faced by their subordinates, which could be achieved during one-to-ones, appraisals and coaching/mentoring sessions.

Organisational factors that act as work stressors were examined in a number of the articles reviewed, but none sought to examine how these stressors are dealt with by managers.

Organisational factors by their nature are varied and can include organisational culture and the management style adopted within an organisation (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). Organisations with highly bureaucratic processes and hierarchical structures and allow for little individual control and participation by workers are cited as contributing to increased levels of strain/stress among workers and negative relationships between managers and subordinates. Guzley (1992) and O'Driscoll & Evans (1988) identify that poor or negative communications and communication processes contribute to job dissatisfaction, role conflict and ambiguity issues. Indeed, promotion of good communication is cited as being associated with reduced psychological distress and the literature suggests that managers have an important role in communicating information so as to reduce distress felt by workers (Houtman, Jettinghof & Cedillo, 2007; Luszcynska & Cieslak 2005; Tsutsumi, Kayaba & Iskikawa, 2011; Eguchi et al, 2012).

The positive links between employee involvement and engagement and reducing work stress have been well documented. Studies have concluded that managers have a fundamental role in providing opportunities for individuals to participate in decision-making processes, which is cited as being linked to greater job satisfaction and an increased sense of well-being (Karyotakis & Moustakis, 2016; Wagner, 1994). Furthermore, involving workers can increase positive emotions at work (Wall, Bellamy, Evans & Hopkins, 2017) and encourage sustained cultural change (Rossetti & Wall, 2017). The aforementioned studies support the seminal work of Karasek (1979) and the demands-control model that arose from it, which argues that providing individuals with an element of freedom and control in how and when they do their job results in reduced levels of stress. Similarly, Pindek & Spector (2016) identified organisational constraints as a stressor that can inhibit or interfere with an individual's performance of job tasks in the workplace. Overall, poor management of organisational factors can result in a poor organisational climate, negative culture, job insecurity and general dissatisfaction among workers. Given the large range of organisational factors, further research would be beneficial in understanding how these factors create stressful workplaces (Dewe et al, 2010) and how these stressors impact on

different groups and levels of the organisation, in particular how organisational factors are identified and managed in practice. In more recent years there has been an increased recognition that remote and mobile workers are exposed to particular sources of work stress because of the isolating effect of their work, increased risk of violence and aggression and the effects of reduced supervision and colleague support (Nayani et al, 2018; CIPD, 2018b).

There is an increasing recognition of the positive links between employee well-being and improving work-life balance. Therefore, managers need to be aware of the how they can reduce potential home-work interface stressors experienced by workers. Home-work interface stressors revolve around the relationship between a worker's personal and work responsibilities and have been cited as a work stressor in numerous studies (Hughes, Kinder & Cooper, 2019b; Cox & Griffiths, 2010; Robertson & Cooper, 2011). The types of home-work conflict stressors that individual workers can experience vary greatly and are dependent on numerous factors, including gender, age and family situation. Variables that are cited as increasing the impact home-work interface stressors include time constraints, lack of personal resources, increased demands and decreased levels of control (Hughes et al, 2019b; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Moreover, there is an increasing recognition that achieving a better work-life balance for workers makes good business sense and improves levels of employee well-being, satisfaction and retention (Hesketh & Cooper, 2019; Hughes et al, 2019b; Yuile et al, 2012).

Guidance available for organisations and managers on reducing workplace stress tends to echo the findings of the research and studies described above. Guidance for managers available from the CIPD and HSE describes positive behaviours that will reduce or minimise the impact of work stress on employees. In addition, Johnson (2009) developed a shortened stress evaluation tool (also known as the ASSET model) which describes how organisations and managers can limit the effects of stress on individuals (see Table 2.2). The ASSET model of organisational well-being is echoed in the work of Robertson & Cooper (2011) which

supports the notion that organisational approaches to stress management and positive behaviours are effective in managing stress and work pressure. The limitation of the literature reviewed is that there is an absence of research that examines the application of stress management guidance and best practice from the perspective of managers.

Table 2.2: The ASSET model: positive pressure and support (Johnson, 2009)

Stressors/sources of pressure	Optimum organisational conditions	Examples of positive pressures	Examples of positive support
Resources and communication	Visible leadership, good provision of information, resources and development	A leader with an inspiring vision; exciting career development opportunities	Good communication practices; well-resourced IT support
Control	Having a voice and influence over what is done and how	Responsibility of making key decisions; involvement in making improvements	Manager uses team meetings to gather input – and take this into account
Work-life balance and workload	Health balance between work and home life, challenging but manageable work demands	Challenging but realistic deadlines; difficult but important problems to solve; desire to balance work and home life	Flexible working policies and practices; clarity of manager's expectations and guidance on priorities
Job security and change	Organisation change is stimulating, helpful and well-managed	New systems and processes that bring clear benefits; new job opportunities	Training in new skills; consultation on implementation of change
Work relationships	Relationships are constructive and collaborative but also stimulating/challenging	Constructive debate and/or healthy competition within the team	Colleagues sharing the workload when someone is absent; sharing expertise
Job conditions	Interesting, stimulating roles with motivational rewards and working conditions	Motivational bonus scheme; stimulating and varied work; demanding but appreciative manager and customers	Transparency of remuneration and benefits; a clean, bright work environment; recognition of success

The preventative, risk-based approaches are most effective in managing workplace stress, as they proactively identify and control workplace stressors before they become an issue for the organisation or individuals (Holman et al, 2018; Leka et al, 2005; Tetrick, Quick & Quick, 2005). Preventative risk-based approaches to stress management are also considered the most beneficial and effective in improving organisational resilience and improving worker well-being and performance (Cooper, Flint-Taylor & Pearn, 2013; Beresford, Gibson, Bayliss

& Mukherjee, 2018; European Commission: Executive Agency for Health & Consumers, 2013). Furthermore, taking an organisational approach to stress management can have a wider impact (Jacobs, Johnson & Hassell, 2018; Leka et al, 2005), such as reduced sickness absence; reduced staff turnover; increased productivity; improved staff morale and job satisfaction; improved management practices and a positive organisational reputation. However, studies have suggested that there is a tendency for organisations to view stress as an individual issue rather than one of job design or environmental issues, and there is a reluctance of management to accept responsibility for the levels of stress experienced by workers (IOSH & Management Today, 2019; Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Cooper et al, 2001). This reluctance to address stress as organisational issue could be a contributory factor in the increasing impact of work stress on organisations and their employees.

From a legal and moral standpoint, guidance from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (ILO, HSE and EU OSHA) cite that organisations (or employers, as defined in UK law) are better able to discharge their legal duties to prevent the ill health of their employees and others if they take a preventative approach to managing stress at work (ILO, 2016; EU OSHA, 2015b). Given the growing importance of the manager's role in reducing the impact of workplace stress, further research should be considered to understand the challenges and realities of managing the stress experienced by managers. This is particularly important if managers are to apply preventative, risk-based strategies to managing stress at work. Much of the training and guidance currently available to managers relates to identifying and managing individuals already displaying signs of mental ill health or stress, which is not conducive to the preventative, organisational approaches to managing stress that organisations should aspire to. Research conducted by Business in the Community (2018) has reported that there is a disconnect between what senior leaders believe is in place to support staff and the realities experienced by employees. This disconnect could be contributing to the pressures on middle managers and could offer an explanation as to why many organisations continue manage workplace stress reactively rather than in a proactive organisational manner, despite the guidance and research

recommending the contrary. As such, further research in exploring how organisations operate and deal with the issue of work stress would be beneficial with a view to better understand their reluctance (Cooper et al, 2001; Murphy & Sauter, 2003) to taking an organisational approach to managing stress at work.

While organisations experience financial (and other) losses as a result of workplace stress, statistics indicate that individual workers affected by workplace stress suffer personally in terms of their health, career, financial stability and general well-being. The HSE (2015) estimates that individuals bear the brunt of the costs of stress and mental ill health (57 per cent), while employers, the government and taxpayers each bear a similar proportion (19 per cent and 24 per cent respectively). The long-term impact and cost that individuals incur as a result of work-related stress is difficult to quantify. It is conceivable that individuals who suffer the long-term effects of stress do not fulfil their personal and career potential. While managers are increasingly cited as having an essential role managing and reducing the impact of stress on the mental health and well-being of their subordinates (IOSH & Management Today, 2019; CIPD, 2016b; OECD, 2015a; EU OSHA, 2010), other sources suggest that managing workplace stress is no easy task, due to increased work expectations, organisational constraints and longer working hours (Pindek & Spector, 2016; ILO, 2016). Furthermore, ILO (2016) also suggests that the current turbulent economic situation, ongoing organisational changes and restructuring are impacting on workers' psychological health and well-being, along with uncertain employment arrangements, reduced work opportunities, job insecurity and financial instability.

2.2.2 Stress management interventions and tools

In their work on stress, Cooper et al (2001) identify three types of SMI: primary, secondary and tertiary (Table 2.3). They concur that prevention is better than cure and that removing or reducing the number or intensity of stressors would be the most beneficial approach for the organisation and the individual. However, it is understood that less than a third of

employers have formal procedures in place to manage workplace stressors/hazards (Eurofound, 2014) and, as previously discussed, there is a tendency for organisations to view stress as an individual issue (IOSH & Management Today, 2019; Murphy & Sauter, 2003; Cooper et al, 2001) – both of which could be a contributory factor to the increase in reported issues relating workplace stress.

Table 2.3: Typology of SMIs, adapted from Dewe, O'Driscoll & Cooper (2001)

Intervention	Assumption	Scope and target	Examples
Primary interventions	Most effective approach = remove work stressors	Preventative: to remove or reduce the number or intensity of stressors Targets: work environments, technologies or organisational structures and functions	Job design/redesign, role restructuring, management development (e.g. communication)
Secondary interventions	May not be able to remove/reduce stressors – focus on individuals' reaction to them	Preventative and/or reactive: modify individuals' responses to stressors Targets: individual people	Training, wellness programmes
Tertiary interventions	Focus on treatment once 'damage' has occurred	Reactive: minimise damage of stressors by helping people cope with the outcomes Targets: individual people	Counselling, therapy, employee assistance programmes

Numerous studies have supported the notion that primary SMIs (preventative by their nature) are more effective than secondary SMIs, which focus on reducing the impact of stress on individuals with tertiary interventions that are designed to minimise the impact of stressors or help individuals cope (Holman et al, 2018; Lamontagne et al, 2007; Bambra, Egan, Thomas & Petticrew, 2007, 2007; Semmer, 2006). Other studies have evaluated the effect of both organisational interventions and individual-level interventions on organisational outcomes and individual workers' well-being. They found that individual interventions were only effective at the individual level and not at an organisational level, whereas organisational-level interventions were effective at both an individual and organisational level (Di Fabio, 2017; Lamontagne et al, 2007). This suggests that, to be effective, SMIs should be conducted at the organisational level, thereby reducing the

sources of stress in the work environment (HSE, 2018; Lamontagne et al, 2007; Bambra et al, 2007). Yet other studies suggest that organisations continue to implement tertiary intervention programmes, with Kompier & Aust (2016) indicating that there is insufficient research into the implementation and outcomes of organisational stress interventions, and that existing research reveals mixed results, making it difficult to identify the best ways to reduce workplace stress and to convince organisations to engage with SMIs at work.

Similar studies found that organisations are increasingly using tertiary interventions such as employee assistance programmes, which are often outsourced to external providers and predominantly provide tertiary interventions like counselling and therapy services to workers affected by stressors (Narayanasamy et al, 2018; Arthur, 2010). This supports the findings of the research undertaken by Giga, Noblet, Faragher & Cooper (2003) which concluded that since the 1990s, UK organisations have focused on interventions like meditation, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and employee assistance programmes, while very few organisations implemented primary or secondary interventions such as role stress management, peer support groups and increased autonomy and participation in decision making. Giga et al (2003) also reported that very few organisations tested the effects of organisation-level strategies like those seeking to change work environments or job redesign initiatives. A similar situation was reported in the United States by Murphy and Sauter (2003), when they conducted a review of SMI evaluations and concluded that most initiatives were focused on individually targeted interventions to reduce the effects of strain rather than address the causes of the strain directly. If, as indicated earlier, preventative, organisational approaches to managing work stressors are to be encouraged, further research would be beneficial in understanding the current trends in the use of tertiary and secondary SMIs that focus on individual workers. One question that could be asked is whether the reported trends in the use of externally provided and tertiary interventions (e.g. Employee Assistance Programmes or EAPs for short) is a factor in how managers are managing work stress. For example, the use of external EAPs encouraging a culture of

signposting employees to other services instead of tackling the organisational factors and stressors that could be causing the issue.

A number of tools are available to organisations and managers to support them in managing stress. Research conducted on the use and application of stress management tools has tended to focus on the application of HSE's self-assessment indicator tool in groups of individuals (Bridger, Dobson, & Davison, 2016; Kerr, McHugh, & McCrory, 2009) and the use of data collected by the tool at an organisational level (Edwards, Webster, Van Laar & Easton, 2008). Toderi, Gaggia, Balducci & Sarchielli (2015) used a short version of HSE's stress management competency indicator tool (SMCIT) to collect 'upward feedback' from staff relating to their managers' behaviour at work. The researchers used only 'Managing and communicating existing and future work' items from HSE's management standards to gather data from 178 employees from two public sector organisations in Italy. Toderi et al (2015) indicate that there is scope to use the SMCIT for the development of workshops and training for managers. They did not go as far as suggesting that research using the manager's version of the SMCIT questionnaire should be undertaken. The literature and research reviewed suggests that several assessment instruments can be used to assess work-related stressors, but that they are not used in practice (Theorell, 2011). As these tools were developed to support organisations in proactively identifying, assessing and managing work stressors, more research would be beneficial in understanding how managers could use these tools.

The evidence tells us that managing stress is more difficult in practice than articulated in the policy, practice and scholarly literatures; indeed, part of the issue could be that managers themselves are a stressor. However, the role of the manager in tackling stress is underexplored in the literature, and so the next section explores some of the challenges and tensions of the middle manager in managing stress.

2.3 The complex and contentious role of middle managers in managing stress

This section defines the position of the middle manager within the organisational hierarchy and discusses the challenges and tensions that those middle managers experience by virtue of their position and the nature of their role. Firstly, the definition of a middle manager adopted during this research is provided and justified. This is followed by an overview of the organisational context in which middle managers operate, including the effects of flattening organisations and devolved responsibilities. Finally, the position of middle managers 'in between' senior and junior colleagues and the complexities of balancing strategic and operational needs is further analysed.

2.3.1 Defining the middle manager and locating their position within the organisation

Traditionally, organisations have been structured hierarchically, and the literature relating to the role of managers ordinarily focuses on a specific layer of management (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty & Salas, 2010; Rezvani, 2017). Specific organisational positions will affect the role of the manager in terms of influence, authority and interaction with senior and junior role holders (Heyden, Sihdu & Volberda, 2018; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). In recent times organisational structures have become flatter and have seen a reduction in the levels of management (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Kelly, 2019; McConville & Holden, 1999) having the effect of increasing the scope and responsibilities of middle managers (Hales, 2005; Holden & Roberts, 2004; Huusko, 2006). In flatter organisations, there is little difference in the traditional roles of manager and supervisor (Down & Reveley, 2009; Hales, 2005; Johnson & Szamosi, 2018; Musson & Duberley, 2007) and hybrid organisational structures and hierarchies have started to operate alongside or replace traditional organisational structures and hierarchies (Ainsworth, Grant & Iedema, 2009; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Pedersen & Hartley, 2008). However, it is questionable whether traditional top-down hierarchies have ceased to exist, or whether they have just been redefined (Hales, 2002; Hassard et al, 2009). Given the complexities of organisations and their structures,

some researchers highlight the importance of treating managers and their position in organisations in their individual contexts, rather than as a predefined group (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Kilroy & Dundon, 2015; Musson & Duberley, 2007; Thomas & Linstead, 2002).

Research suggests that organisations are embodied by the way that they are structured along with the internal rules and external contexts within which they exist (Pye, 2005). Furthermore, it has been suggested that these structures can enable and facilitate (and sometimes limit) an organisation's achievements by providing pre-existing cues and tools that direct managers to a specific way of thinking or seeing (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). This can be achieved through the way that people and functions are organised and the hierarchies that exist (Doos, Johansson & Wilhelmson, 2015), job design (Grant, Berg, & Cable, 2014), job titles (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), human resource management (HRM) practices (Delmestri, 2006), distribution of power (Luhrmann & Eberl, 2007) and the way that employees are assessed and rewarded (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; ; Clegg, Kornberger & Pitsis, 2011; Collinson, 2003). The way the organisations measure performance, set targets, use appraisals, develop business plans and use audits, league tables and customer feedback will also influence how managers translate and operationalise corporate strategy (Clegg et al, 2011; Collinson, 2003).

Studies have suggested that managers, their identities and their position within their organisations are in a state of continuous change (Andersson, 2010; Clarke et al, 2009; Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014) and, despite being the focus of research, management and the role of a manager has not been defined or underpinned by an established body of knowledge, operating principles or competencies (Lloyd & Payne, 2014). On the contrary, Watson (2001) suggests that management is a social and moral practice, necessitating managers to interpret and communicate organisational requirements and respond to the needs of others. The role of middle managers is often described as translating the intentions of others (senior management) into operational action (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Rezvani. 2017). However, their definition could also apply to descriptions by others of supervisory

and first-line management roles (Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015; Hales, 2005). Despite middle managers being constrained by senior management direction and the contexts within which they work, they do not simply give instructions to their subordinate groups: they also interpret, convey and implement aspects of executive strategy at an operational level (Seijts & Roberts, 2011).

The role of the middle manager can be identified as sitting in between the often-competing demands and expectations of senior managers and organisational needs and those of the employees they manage below them. While middle managers are noted by many as playing an important role in reframing organisational strategy and change, some suggest that they often struggle to make sense of organisationally driven initiatives themselves (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). There is a growing literature examining strategic sense-making and change (Balogun & Rouleau, 2017) some of which suggests that senior managers seek to comprehend external dynamics and then initiate responsive organisational change (Alvesson & Sveningsson. 2015). By contrast, the middle managers who are charged with implementing such changes can experience confusion as they grapple with multiple unclear mandates. When going through organisational change, many employees will be looking to their managers to provide clarity on senior management mandates, while managers themselves will be struggling to understand it (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016).

The trend of making organisations flatter and removing hierarchical layers of management should improve communication and make it easier for the middle manager to mediate between senior management and other employees (Johnson & Szamosi, 2018). However, studies have suggested that when organisations become leaner and flatter, middle managers continue to experience difficulties in making sense of organisational strategy (thought to be a result of restructuring), meaning senior managers have less contact with those working in the lower levels of the organisation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun & Rouleau, 2017). One question that could be asked is whether having fewer interactions with

senior managers is limiting the opportunities for middle managers to seek clarification on organisational strategy, resulting in a continued lack of clarity and direction.

2.3.2 Middle managers: their position between their superior and junior colleagues

This section further examines the position of middle managers in between senior managers and their junior colleagues, and the specific challenges this position can bring. As Ainsworth et al (2009) note, much of the existing research and literature relating to middle managers identifies that being 'in the middle' is negative or problematic for the individuals in their position, describing middle managers as being stuck between more influential superiors and their operational charges or being in a 'muddle' or a position of ambiguity. The middle managers' role is not normally an autonomous one and is subject to the influences and demands from senior managers, colleagues around and employees below, as well as others inside and outside the organisation (Gabel, 2002) with their success depending upon maintaining relationships with all of these 'stakeholders'. The middle manager will commonly experience conflicting expectations and needs from stakeholders, which can often lead to role conflict and ambiguity for the middle manager (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Glaser, Fourne & Elfring, 2015). Often, managers themselves recognise this situation, with research conducted in relation to a cohort of part-time MBA students finding that the participants described the nature of their managerial work as managing vertical and horizontal relationships within their organisation and those with external stakeholders (Warhurst, 2011). These MBA students drew upon their experience of reconciling competing demands and conflicts as characterising their management practice. Similarly, other studies have suggested that managers recognise the political nature of organisations and how this affects their daily interactions with other organisational members, and adopt different behaviours in order to address different stakeholder interests (Sheard, Kakabadse & Kakabadse, 2011) and that they need to navigate contradictory positions in order to fulfil their role (Harding et al, 2014; Rezvani, 2017).

There is an increasing body of research and literature that focuses on the traditional position of the middle manager within the organisational hierarchy (Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015; Lloyd & Payne, 2014; Rezvani, 2017). As such, middle managers can experience complicated relationships with power because power can be activated and experienced by middle managers within the context of their work and relationships between those above and below them (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). For instance, when interacting with their superiors, they may naturally adopt a more subservient or 'low-power' behavioural style. In contrast, when interacting with their subordinates, they can adopt a superior, assertive or 'high-power' behavioural style. Being expected to conform to these role-based behaviours and expectations can lead the middle manager into conflict and role-based confusion, meaning that middle managers need to quickly learn how they are expected to behave. By virtue of their role and position within the organisational hierarchy, middle managers can simultaneously be the victims and the enforcers of change through receiving strategic direction from their superiors and having to implement those strategies with those working beneath them (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005). This can result in middle managers finding themselves positioned between numerous stakeholder groups which can result in relentless and conflicting demands from all angles.

Research conducted by Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate (2000) suggests that moving between stakeholders and addressing their needs can produce role conflict stress which studies suggest middle managers are disproportionately exposed and prone to. Their research suggests that the norms and expectations of being a leader are incompatible with the norms and expectations of being a subordinate (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017). This situation can become problematic when the middle manager is expected to play both roles at work, because humans can be inefficient when expected to switch tasks – as evidenced by research relating to the effects of managing work-home interface stressors. Studies exploring work-home interface stressors have suggested that it is psychologically challenging for workers to

disengage from a task requiring them to display one mindset while engaging in another task that requires a different mindset.

The need to operate across the different levels of an organisation's hierarchy means that middle managers will encounter different perceptions and perspectives (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Seijts & Roberts, 2011). As such, they may be seen as having a vital role in facilitating communication between senior managers and other employees (Corley, 2004; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006). They will be expected to translate macro-strategy into micro-operation (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Huy, 2002), mediating conflicting needs and requirements (Alexiadou, 2001) while mitigating the effects of change, including potential stress and its emotional impact on staff (Huy, 2002). This places middle managers in a position where they are managing complex personal and organisational issues while navigating the needs of a range of stakeholders. In summary, middle managers could be said to be key strategic actors within an organisation, essential for keeping their superiors and subordinates aligned in carrying out organisational strategy (Currie & Proctor, 2005).

While some managers may view their role of bridging gaps and facilitating change in a positive light (Corley, 2004; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006), their position between senior managers and staff remains problematic. Modern organisations comprise of individuals (senior managers and employees) whose co-operation needs to be sought and resources which become subordinate to the needs of the organisation and are therefore expendable (Watson, 2001). The requirement to balance the needs of the individual and the organisation is challenging and fraught with tensions that many never be resolved. In practice, the position of the middle manager in between the individual and the organisation can present a number of challenges for the middle manager's workplace role and identity. In their role they may be required to embody the role of the pragmatic manager alongside that of the leader who is able to make tough decisions for the sake of the organisation, meanwhile maintaining the role of caring, supportive supervisor and colleague (Clarke, Brown & Hailey, 2009).

Enacting organisational strategy may make middle managers unpopular, but they are still expected to engage with workers to secure their compliance (Holden & Roberts, 2004; Lloyd & Payne, 2014). Middle managers will be expected to publicly support corporate decisions that they themselves do not agree with (Sims, 2003), at the same time as fostering loyalty and goodwill among other workers (McConville & Holden, 1999) – all the while retaining personal credibility and adhering to their professional values (Austin, Regan, Gothard & Carnochan, 2013; Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015). It could be argued that the conflicting requirements of enterprise and the organisation, resulting in increasingly restrictive organisational controls, have made the role of the middle manager increasingly challenging. Middle managers are increasingly responsible for winning the hearts and minds of workers and being personally responsible for outcomes (Du Gay, 1996), meanwhile there is a trend of reducing the autonomy of managers in making personal decisions and using discretion (Carter et al, 2014).

2.3.3 Particular stressors experienced by middle managers

The role of the middle managers has been an increasing focus in recent guidance on the management of work stress. However, the trend in reducing layers of management has, in the main, been driven by factors such as increasing global competition (Holden & Roberts, 2004; Johnson & Szamosi, 2018) rather than a desire to improve the management of organisations. The removal of layers of hierarchy has also been driven by a belief that middle managers can act as organisational obstacles: additional layers who simply 'pass down' instructions to others (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Rezvani. 2017) or who act as resistors of change (Heyden, Fourne, Koene, Werkman & Ansari, 2017). The trend in reducing layers of management has been prevalent in the UK's public and private sectors (Hassard et al, 2009). This has impacted on those remaining middle managers in a number of ways, including an increase in workload and responsibility by assuming HRM functions and seeing

their responsibilities becoming increasingly diverse and fragmented (Hassard et al, 2009; Holden & Roberts, 2004; Scase & Goffee, 2017).

These increases in responsibility, along with ongoing advances in technology, have led to the increasing trend in general managers becoming responsible for workers in technical roles. This has resulted in middle managers becoming less responsible for technical expertise and maintaining control over work and becoming more responsible for managing processes and supporting people (Carter et al, 2014; Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010). There has also been a growing trend of developing senior professionals into managerial roles, particularly in the public sector, which further blurs the distinction between technical and managerial roles (Bolton, 2005; Scase & Goffee, 2017).

Another problem is that middle managers may not be part of decision-making processes (or may have little power to influence them) while still be expected to implement these decisions and remain accountable for their delivery (Ainsworth et al, 2009; Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015). Their lack of involvement may result in middle managers being allocated insufficient resources to successfully implement decisions (McConville & Holden, 1999). Issues relating to power and control can also affect a manager's relationships with the workers they manage, which indicates that workers are more likely to listen to and trust a manager if they believe that the manager has power (Pelz, 1952). This suggests that organisations risk undermining the position and effectiveness of middle managers if they do not involve them in decision making, or have removed their decision-making functions (Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010). It could be argued that when seeking to maintain the trust and respect of their workers, managers must be provided with incentives to publicly support organisational decisions. This can be especially important when the decision is likely to be unpopular and managers are expected to motivate workers to buy into the decision.

The middle manager's position in between their subordinates and superiors can make their position vulnerable to change or deletion from the structure of the organisation. In organisations with a flat structure, it can be difficult for middle managers to avoid animosity

from both senior managers and their subordinates (McConville & Holden, 1999). In effect, middle managers can operate as the 'face' of workers in front of senior management and the face of senior management to workers, thus embodying sources of frustration to each group (Gleeson & Shain, 2003). McConville (2006) suggests that when middle managers are in a mediating role, their position can be diminished because their lack of autonomy and power can be revealed. Middle managers face the risk of being seen as interpreters without an argument or negotiating strategy of their own. McConville (2006) also suggests that middle managers can defer organisational tensions by acting as a buffer between those above and below them. Their position can be likened to the role of the "toxic handler" (Frost & Robinson, 1999) who provides the emotional support needed by workers to help them cope with organisational change and dysfunction. Frost & Robinson (1999) go on to suggest that the emotional cost to toxic handlers who bear the brunt of both their superior's and subordinate's demands and frustrations can be a risk in itself, through a lack of strategy to manage the impact on themselves and their peers.

This lack of strategic clarity can result in an anxiety which can debilitate decision making and strategy implementation/change. Middle and senior managers are often the primary conveyers of organisational communication; however, the position of more senior managers (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk & Roe, 2011) may also influence the behaviour and identity of middle managers beneath them. Senior management may influence the scope and nature of organisational strategy, which will reduce the degree of support and resources they make available to middle managers, which in turn can increase stress (Henderson, Burmeister, Schoonbeck, Ossenberg & Gneilding, 2014). Senior managers may try to construct the roles of their subordinate middle managers so as to support their own identity, and be resistant to change or innovation (Currie & Proctor, 2005; Raes. Heijltjes, Glunk & Roe, 2011). This may cause problems for middle managers, with senior managers asserting their own authority, micromanaging and publicly undermining or overruling decisions made by middle managers (Gleeson & Shain, 2003; Sims, 2003; Warhurst, 2011). In addition, senior managers may have priorities that influence how middle managers make decisions (Soltani

& Wilkinson, 2010), which can make the middle manager's role of representing the organisation to their subordinates uncomfortable, challenging and unclear (Lee & Taylor, 2014; Pye, 2005).

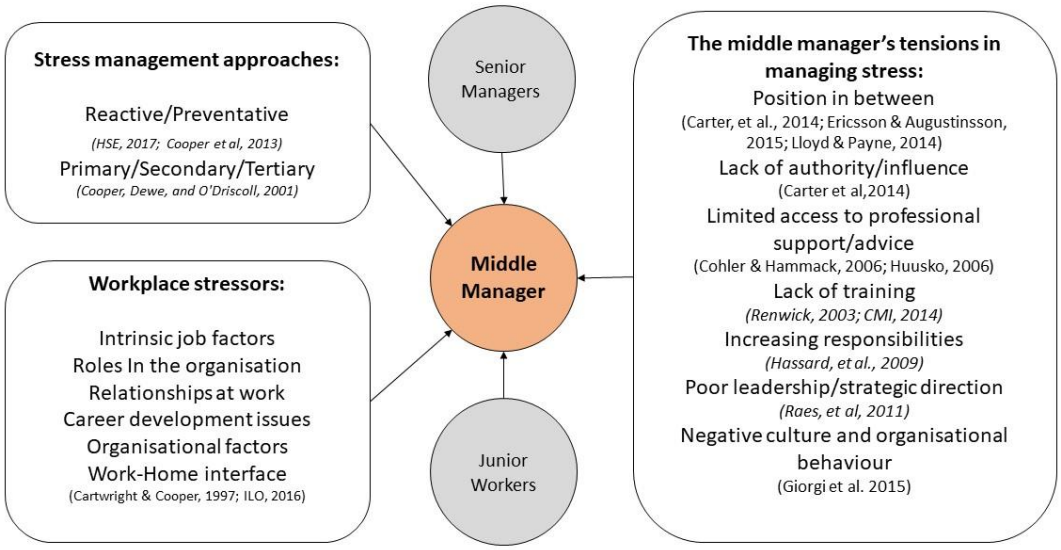
Changes in the structures of organisations have also had implications for the role and position of middle managers, as highlighted by McConville & Holden (1999) who suggest that reductions in layers of management and subsequent increases in traditional HRM responsibilities have made middle managers more visible to their superiors and subordinates and potentially more vulnerable to role stressors and conflict. McConville & Holden (1999) go further, suggesting that technical expertise can provide individuals with a source of power and status, as experts in their field, whereas the role of a middle manager can be a lot riskier, competitive and require more negotiation. It is also suggested that professionals who have assumed additional managerial duties can find it difficult to deal with the competing demands that come with the role (Austin et al, 2013; Scase & Goffee, 2017). Indeed, results of the 2018 UK Working Lives Survey (CIPD, 2018b) suggest those in middle management are more likely to be overworked than their more senior and junior colleagues. The new organisational structures and technologies being used may present further sources of stress for middle managers, and they may be less able to rely on levels above them, and so need to renegotiate and recreate their position of authority (Ainsworth et al, 2009; Pedersen & Hartley, 2008). Their position could also become vulnerable if their superiors and subordinates start to deal with each other directly (Warhurst, 2011).

This section has explored the challenging role of managers and relates this to managing stress, attempting to explain why managing stress is more complex than articulated in policy, practice and scholarly literature.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has defined workplace stress for the purposes of this study and has introduced the literature in relation to the espoused role of managers in workplaces. The chapter then discussed the literature on managing work stress, then argued that the evidence suggests that this is more difficult in practice than articulated in the policy, practice and scholarly literatures. The final section of the chapter the reviews the literature on the position of the middle manager and explores the challenges that this employee group are faced with in the organisational context – as subjects of organisational change, and then as subjects of competing organisational interests. The issues and complexities discussed in this chapter have led to the development of an initial conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) which highlights potential factors that could be influencing how middle managers and organisations are currently managing workplace stress.

Figure 2.1: Initial conceptual framework – middle managers managing stress in social housing



Chapter 3 – Research Methodology

In previous chapters, the professional, theoretical and conceptual basis for research into how middle managers working in social housing mitigate the effects of work stress on employees was established. In these chapters recent data from national and international sources suggest that there is a potential disconnection between the theories relating to preventative stress management and what is actually being done in the workplace. Also, despite the increasing focus on the role of managers in reducing the impact of work stress, there are limitations in the current body of knowledge in relation to the experiences of middle managers, whose position in between senior and junior colleagues can be fraught with challenges. This research seeks to make an original contribution to the body of knowledge by exploring the previously under-researched experiences of middle managers in the social housing sector in relation to managing workplace stress and exploring some of the gaps that might exist between management theory and practice (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

This chapter first sets out the underpinning philosophical frameworks that guided the approach and methodologies used to conduct the research (King & Horrocks, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Secondly, this chapter describes and justifies the research strategy and procedures adopted to achieve the aim of the research (Silverman, 2010; Creswell, 2009), which was to explore how middle managers in social housing are managing the workplace stress experienced by employees. Finally, the chapter discusses matters of transparency, trustworthiness, truthfulness and ethics through which the quality of this research should be judged.

3.1 Philosophical framework

While a researcher's 'worldview' (or *Weltanschauung*) and philosophical, ontological and epistemological positions are important, the research methodologies deployed in research should also reflect the nature, subject and object of the research so as to investigate and answer the research question. Traditionally, working within a recognisable research paradigm with established assumptions and frameworks has been seen by some as being essential when undertaking research (Cooper, 2008), but more recently others have suggested that this approach can be flawed and overly prescriptive (Becker, 2008). In part, this change in stance has been attributed to the increasingly popular view that the field of management and professional research is ever more pluralistic, contextualised and methodologically more varied (Cunliffe, 2010).

As such, researchers are being encouraged to rigorously craft research strategies that achieve the objectives of the research, rather than being driven by established methods (Cunliffe, 2010). While Denzin & Lincoln (2018) concur with others that research paradigms are not solidified, they suggest that all researchers need to consider matters of axiology (ethics and values), accommodation and commensurability (do the paradigms 'fit' with one another), action (what the researcher does in the real world) and control (who initiates the inquiry and asks the questions). They suggest that the researcher should create a bricolage of paradigmatic representations that are crafted to fit the specifics of the inquiry and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

To make the contributions described in the introduction to this chapter, this research took a constructivist (also referred to as interpretivist) approach to exploring the realities of managing stress from the perspective of the middle manager in the social housing sector to reveal whether they are able (or not) to manage employee stress as suggested in the theories and guidance explored in previous chapters. Positivism and naturalism were not considered appropriate philosophical perspectives for this research as the former is more

aligned with quantitative research, and the latter is more concerned with the factual characteristic of the study (Silverman, 2015).

This research proceeded from a relativist ontological position, which assumes that realities are personal, localised, experiential, and socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The term ontology refers to the division of philosophy associated with the nature of what is thought to be real (Blaikie, 2012). This research was undertaken through the constructivist perspective, seeking meaning in the views of the participants (Creswell, 2009) – appropriate in research which aims to understand the experiences of individual managers who are directly involved in activities. As such, the relativist ontological position is aligned with exploring how middle managers as individuals manage the issue of workplace stress within their organisations and the social housing sector context. The realist ontology was not considered appropriate for this research as it considers realities to be more permanent and aligns with positivistic approaches (Stokes & Wall, 2014).

Epistemologically, this research has proceeded from a subjectivist position where the researcher can be an integral part of the research process, co-creating the findings with the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) on the basis that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions between the researcher and the researched (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In constructivist research, the researcher can construct knowledge by exploring the local and specific realties of participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) through their interpretation of the data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009), rather than attempting to exclude the beliefs of the researcher. This means, however, that the constructivist researcher must seek confirmation from participants that their voices have interpreted correctly and the researcher needs to reflexive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009) in their approach to analysing data and identifying themes to ensure the trustworthiness, truthfulness and transparency (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) of the findings. Conversely, the objectivist epistemological position requires limited researcher involvement or interference which is more suited to positivistic research and therefore incompatible with this type of research (Stokes & Wall, 2014).

This research has been undertaken based upon the inductive approach. This approach has its origins in the natural sciences; however, it is increasingly being applied in research following social constructionist approaches – particularly in management and leadership research (Klenke, 2008). Research conducted inductively and based on qualitative data offers insights that can challenge existing, taken-for-granted theories and highlight new theoretical directions (Bansal, Smith & Vaara, 2018). Other approaches were considered for this research, but were discounted as inappropriate as they do not fit with the aim of the research and wider philosophical approach being adopted. The abductive approach was discounted because of the expectation that the researcher has a detailed knowledge of both the topic and context of the research so that they may identify the actors and causes of a social phenomenon (Preissle, 2006). The deductive approach was discounted because of its roots in the natural sciences and alignment with positivistic research (Bryman, 1988), as was the retroductive approach because it requires the researcher to construct hypothetical models, which is more aligned with the positivistic epistemology (Blaikie, 2012).

A summary of the research philosophy, approach and strategy adopted during this research is provided in Table 3.1 below. A detailed overview of the methodology and procedures deployed during this research is also provided in Figure 3.1 on page 68 .

Table 3.1: Summary of research philosophy, approach and strategy

Consideration	Adopted approach	Rationale
Philosophical perspective	Constructivist	To explore the realities of managing stress from the perspective of the middle manager in the social housing sector data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009)
Ontological position	Relativist	Realities are personal, localised, experiential and constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 2005)
Epistemological position	Subjectivist	The researcher is an integral part of the process and co-creates findings with the participants
Research approach	Inductive	Inductive research based on qualitative data has the potential to offer insights that can challenge existing, taken-for-granted theories and expose new theoretical directions (Bansal et al, 2018)
Sampling strategy	Purposeful	Participants are middle managers in the social housing sector (Silverman, 2015)
Data collection method	Semi-structured interviews	To explore the experiences of the participants of managing employee stress (Creswell, 2009)
Data analysis method	Thematic, template analysis	To identify and interpret aspects of the research topic as they emerged (Symon & Cassell, 2012; Flick, 2014)

3.2 Research aim, question and objectives

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of middle managers in the social housing sector in managing employee workplace stress and to better understand the approaches and tactics they deploy to manage employee stress along with the challenges and tensions facing the participants. A significant output of this research will be the development of a conceptual framework that will inform an agenda of future research and action. Both the conceptual framework and recommendations made by the researcher will be based on the findings of the research (Silverman, 2015). The question to be explored during this research is:

'How are middle managers in the social housing sector managing employee workplace stress, and why do they take these approaches?'

The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. Explore the experiences of managers in managing employee stress in the social housing sector. In particular this research seeks to better understand:

    a) How do middle managers approach managing the stress of others?
    b) What do middle managers do to help prevent stress in their position?
    c) What influences the approaches that middle managers take to preventing the stress of others?

2. Make recommendations based on the findings of the research, develop a tool to assist middle managers in the social housing sector in managing workplace stress and develop an updated conceptual framework to influence management practice, policymaking and inform a future research agenda.

3.3 Methods for data collection

The data collection methods adopted during this research (outlined in Figure 3.1) were developed to align with the research question, objectives, research philosophical framework and paradigm adopted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Semi-structured interviews were used during this research to explore the experiences of the participants of managing employee stress and whether established theories of preventative stress management are being practised in the workplace, through the lived experiences of managers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Semi-structured interviews are also aligned with the anti-foundationalist stance adopted during this inquiry which assumes that scientific generalisations (and theories) may not fit all contexts or solve all problems (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), with a view to identifying and filling the gaps between theory and knowledge making. As the constructivist perspective is concerned with observing the interactions between social beings (or the

processes of actively creating reality), methods of collecting research data, such as interviews, are another form of social interaction involving the researcher.

During a semi-structured interview, the researcher and the participants can share the process of interpretation and social construction around the topic being investigated. While semi-structured interviews can produce knowledge that could be seen as provisional, it can be built upon as 'what we know for now' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) based on the social interactions and 'conversations' with those who have experienced what is being explored during the research. Semi-structured interviews also offer a unique insight into an individual's experiences and opinions, and so provide the researcher with the opportunity to probe their experiences and opinions to obtain rich and meaningful data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Semi-structured interviews with middle managers are useful as they provide insights through expertise and experience within a local context from the perspective of individual managers who are also affected by the way organisations operate (Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009), which could be significant in light of the challenges faced by middle managers discussed in Chapter 2.

While semi-structured interviews are by their nature intended to explore the participants experience and realities, specific topics need to be covered, these topics need to align with the aim, key research question and objectives of the inquiry (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To ensure that all pertinent topics are covered, researchers can develop an interview guide which provides the interviewer with prompts and topics to cover (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Interview guides tend to be used in semi-structured interviews and are less specific than the questions provided by an interview schedule, something predominantly used during structured interviews in quantitative research studies. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for use during the participant interview conducted for this research (see Appendix A). Interview guides are a mechanism that can assist the researcher when conducting semi-structured interviews and help reduce the potential for bias as a result of the researcher's perceptions and experience. The interview guide used during this research

was developed to align with the research question and objectives of the study, which were derived from the topics identified in the literature review. The interview guide was tested during the pilot study in an attempt to reduce ambiguity and ensure the guide provided a useful structure for the interviewer to follow (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2005). The researcher used open, coaching style, questioning to allow the participants to control the direction of the interview thus limiting the potential for researcher bias. As such, the questions asked during the interview did not necessarily follow the precise order as written in the interview guide. Adopting this approach allowed the interviewer to pick up on the nuances of what the participants were saying and provide maximum flexibility in the process so as to illicit rich data from the participant (Kvale, 1999).

The interviews were digitally recovered so that the researcher could accurately and fully capture the participants' experiences and stories. Consent to digitally record the interview was obtained by the researcher before it commenced, and participants were asked to confirm this when signing their consent forms (see Appendix B). Initially, data such as the participant's job role, their position within the organisation and relevant training were obtained at the start or end of the interview (if not already discussed during the session). However, the researcher found that asking questions such as *"how did you find the interview?"* after the recording had been stopped had elicited valuable insights from the first two participants. These insights were recorded in the researcher's notes for the first two interviews. In subsequent interviews, these questions were asked while the recording was being made to allow the interview to proceed uninterrupted and the participant to tell their story and provide an insight into their world (Klenke, 2008).

Other methods of data collection were considered but were discounted because they were considered not to be aligned with the research approach and objectives. The use of questionnaires and surveys was discounted because they do not facilitate the conversations required for the researcher to explore the day-to-day reality and experiences of the participants. Case studies and focus groups were also considered and rejected as being

unsuitable for use during this study as the research aims to explore the individual middle managers' experiences and realities. The researcher assessed that focus groups might not create an environment in which participants feel able to talk openly and honestly about their experiences.

3.4 Methods for data analysis

The researcher deployed thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting the themes that emerged from the interview data (Flick, 2014). Thematically analysing the interview data enabled the researcher to identify and interpret aspects of the research topic as they emerged and to pursue them further during the data collection/interview process. This is of particular importance given that semi-structured interviews produce rich and deep qualitative data that needs to be analysed rigorously to capture the important themes in relation to the research question, present common/reoccurring themes and establish meaning from the data. When no new relevant themes were emerging and the priori codes/themes were exemplified in the data, thematic and priori thematic saturation was considered to be achieved and further data collection was considered unnecessary. As shown in Figure 3.1, an ongoing process of familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, cataloguing, coding, linking and revaluation of the data (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008) was adopted in order for the researcher to extrapolate emerging themes arising from the interviews, identify when saturation was achieved and support the generation of concepts and theoretical frameworks evolving from the research (Quinlan, 2011). An example of a coded transcript is provided in Appendix C.

To enhance the credibility and accuracy of the interview data, the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber as soon as possible following each interview. However, as Wengraf (2006) points out, personally transcribing interviews is a valuable opportunity for researchers to become immersed in the data and reduce bias on the part of

the researcher. Therefore, the researcher listened to the audio file for each interview while coding the transcripts to refamiliarise himself with the subtle changes in tone and mood, and make additional notes of emerging and reoccurring themes. To further enhance the credibility of the research findings, each participant was sent a copy of their interview transcript and asked to validate its content. Participant validation is a method that can be deployed to ensure the trustworthiness or credibility of the research findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, this approach can be challenging for the research for a number of reasons: the potential for the participant to reflect and change their mind in the time between the interview and their receipt of the transcript and the risk that participant disagrees with the overall interpretation of the findings.

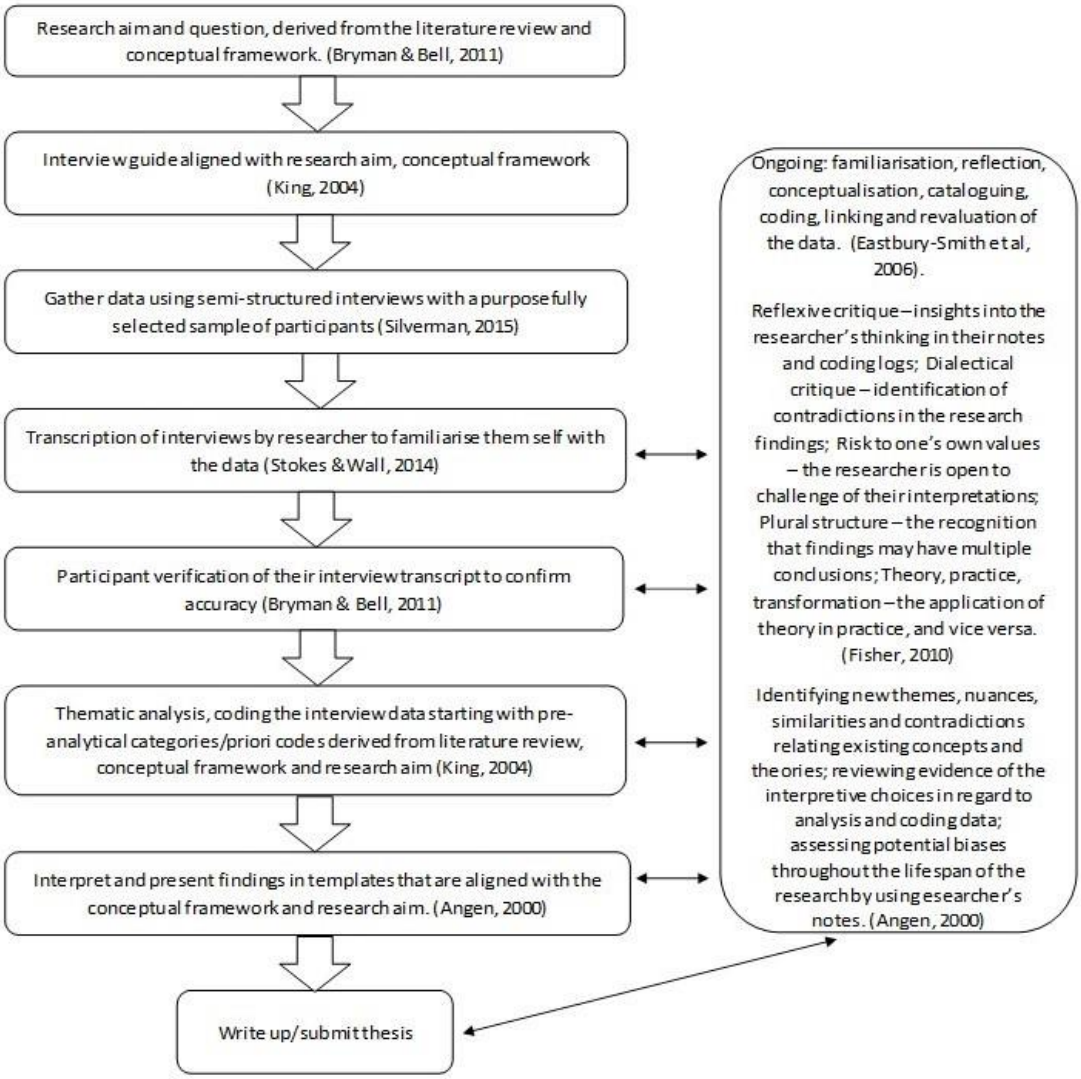
The researcher used a template analysis that provided a flexible data analysis tool, as opposed to a prescribed methodology, enabling the design of a method that matched the requirements of the inquiry (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It has been suggested that using templates fits well with the constructivist position (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000), allowing the researcher to bring order to the data, which is considered important as “there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon” (King, 2004). An example of the template table used during the research is provided in Appendix D , and the full coding matrix table is provided in Appendix E. The interview data was categorised and tabulated using template analysis (Symon & Cassell, 2012) thus ensuring the aims and objectives of the study were met and allowing cross-checking of facts and discrepancies that were identified (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Priori codes derived from the literature review, initial conceptual framework and research objectives were established to assist in the researcher during the initial stages of coding the interview data (King, 2004).

The participant interviews (data collection) and data analysis phases ran concurrently, and the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were continuously reviewed and thematically analysed by the researcher to capture the recurring themes aligned with the aim and objectives of the inquiry (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). Throughout the review and

analysis process, the researcher remained open to new opportunities and insights that provided the opportunity to identify differences and similarities in responses given by participants (Yin, 2009). From the data collected, themes or perspectives were identified and the meaning of the description was generated (Creswell, 2009). During the data collection phase the researcher undertook an ongoing review and evaluation of the data as it was collected to ensure sufficient immersion in the data and able to report on priori themes and common emerging themes not discussed in the literature.

The data analysis procedures deployed in this research were considered to align with the research philosophy, approach and overall methodology. Other data analysis techniques that could have been adopted were initially considered but discounted as they did not align with the philosophy, approach and objectives of this study. For instance, discourse analysis was discounted because this study was not concerned about the way versions of the world, events or psychology are produced in discourse (Potter, 2004). Similarly, triangulation was not deployed because there was no requirement to compare different kinds of data to see if they corroborate with one another (Silverman, 2015).

Figure 3.1 : Overview of research methodology and procedures



3.5 Quality criteria

The issue of evaluating the quality of qualitative research is complex and subject to much debate. While reliability and validity are considered important criteria for judging the quality of quantitative or positivistic research, there is a consensus among many qualitative researchers that these criteria are not appropriate for qualitative inquiries due to their nature, context and relatively small sample size compared to quantitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, Guba & Lincoln (1994) suggest that trustworthiness and authenticity are more appropriate criteria for assessing qualitative studies. Trustworthiness of qualitative research can be made up of four criteria (Guba & Lincoln, 1994): credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

However, these criteria can also be problematic for the qualitative researcher. For example, the criterion of credibility expects findings of multiple accounts of a reality, which is at odds with the relativistic view that there can be multiple realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To ensure the quality of the findings, this inquiry has been developed using the quality criteria developed by Tracy (2010) as a framework, namely: a) a worthy topic, b) rich rigour, c) credibility, d) substantial contribution and e) ethical and meaningful cohesion. While matters relating to the substantial contribution of the research, ethical and meaningful cohesion are addressed in other sections of this thesis, the other criteria are discussed in greater detail below:

a) a worthy topic – this inquiry has explored the experiences of middle managers (social group) from the UK social housing sector (social context) in managing work stress (a global issue) in an attempt to understand the realities of the group and fill the gaps between theory and practice.
b) rich rigour – the topic has been considered worthy through engagement with the theoretical positions and literature on managing workplace stress, the context of social housing and the challenging position of the middle manager. This chapter has

also set out, justified, articulated and documented the data collection and analysis methods deployed, which are underpinned by a philosophical research framework.

c) credibility – the development of an audit trail, the principles of the researcher and participant validation of data collected have been adopted during this research to demonstrate the credibility of the findings. Providing a critique of the research findings can assist the researcher in ensuring that the final analysis is credible.

During this study the researcher sought to further enhance the credibility of the findings by applying the principles outlined by Angen (2000) and Fisher (2010), with the exception of Fisher's principle of 'collaborative resources' which encourages that stakeholders are engaged in the interpretation of the findings. This principle was omitted during this study because of time constraints and the issues arising from participant validation, as discussed earlier in this section. The researcher has developed an audit trail by documenting thinking and decision-making rationale in journal entries (see example in Appendix F) and interpretation of data in interview transcript coding entries (see example in Appendix G). The researcher has attempted to identify contradictions in the research findings and has remained open to challenges to their interpretations and by virtue of the nature of this study recognises that findings may have multiple conclusions. The researcher will reflect on the limitations of this research further in Chapter 5 along with the findings and implications of this research on theory and practice. .

To summarise: the trustworthiness and transparency of the research findings have been strengthened by the provision of an audit trail of interview notes, interview transcripts, reflexive decisions and coding notes, coding tables and reflexive journal notes kept by the researcher. This audit trail is intended to document the thought and decision making process of the researcher while conceptualising the interview data and presenting the findings and themes presented in Chapter 4.

3.6 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted in order for the researcher to trial the data collection and analysis procedures developed for this project in advance of collecting data to be analysed during the study. This is considered good practice as it provides an opportunity to 'iron out' any issues that could jeopardise the study and achievement of the research aim and objectives. For the purposes of this pilot study, two participants who met the criteria for the wider study were interviewed using the interview guide. Once the interviews were completed, transcripts were produced, and the data was coded by the researcher using the codes and coding tables set up initially for this study. The pilot study demonstrated that the research procedures that developed for the study worked as intended. However, the pilot study did highlight several areas that could be improved in order to enhance the data collection and analysis procedure.

Firstly, an additional question was added to the interview guide which asks the participants whether they can foresee upcoming changes in the housing sector that they think might change how they approach managing employee stress. This additional question was considered appropriate because the issues arising from changes in government policy and pressures in the sector generally were cited during the pilot study as impacting on how the participants tackled stress at work. The second enhancement arising from the pilot study related to the coding tables used by the researcher during the data analysis stage: the changes made to the tables related to layout and were therefore fairly minor. However, it is anticipated that the changes made will improve the transparency and validity of the findings and improve presentation of the research findings in the final thesis.

3.7 Sampling strategy

In an attempt to ensure that research participants could provide insights and rich data that is relevant to the research and phenomena being explored, a sampling strategy was developed. For the purposes of this study, a purposive sampling strategy (Silverman, 2015) was adopted to ensure that the research participants were suitable. The researcher developed three qualifying criteria that participants had to meet before taking part in the study. The selection criteria were aligned with the research aim and objectives. Before interviews commenced participants were asked to confirm (see Appendix C) that they meet the following criteria to ensure that they are in a middle manager role:

- are not a director or hold a strategic decision-making role in the organisation (i.e. not senior management);
- report to a manager more senior to them (i.e. are in a position in between); and
- have management responsibly for more junior workers beneath them (meaning their work involves translating strategy into operational activity).

Volunteers were invited to participate through existing professional networks held by the researcher rather than his existing clients. This approach was taken to reduce the potential for participants to answer questions based on what they thought the researcher wanted to hear rather than telling their own stories. Participants were sought through the researcher's contacts in the social housing sector, such those working in human resources or occupational health and safety who forwarded details of the research to colleagues within their organisations asking them to volunteer. Several participants responded to a call for volunteers in a guest blog written by the researcher for the Chartered Institute of Housing.

Sample size in qualitative research is a contentious and much debated topic. It can be challenging to accurately specify the number of interviews required for research projects using qualitative data, and sample sizes are normally lower than those found in those using

quantitative data (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Saturation is a key concept in research taking a constructivist stance and using qualitative data. The concept of saturation is that data should be collected up to a point when no new or relevant themes emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While the concept of saturation in qualitative research has been problematic for some (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) there is, however, an increasing acceptance of data saturation as a methodological principle in qualitative research (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Accordingly, Saunders & Townsend (2016) recommend that the use of saturation as a methodological principle should be consistent with the research questions' theoretical position and the analytical framework adopted.

During this research the model of inductive thematic saturation was adopted as the primary method of identifying whether saturation was achieved. However, given the complexities and lack of guidance on the subject of sample sizes in research using qualitative data, the findings of two recent studies (Mason, 2010; Baker & Edwards, 2012) exploring samples sizes in doctoral research using qualitative data were considered. While both studies conclude that there are no 'hard and fast' rules for how many interviews are required, their research identified that a mean sample size of 30 to 31 interviews is undertaken in doctoral research. In an attempt to mitigate some of the complexities surrounding the concept of data saturation in qualitative research and to assist in planning the research project, the researcher planned for a sample of 30 interviews. Data saturation was in fact reached once the seventeenth interview had been conducted. At this point the researcher assessed that inductive thematic saturation had been achieved and at that point stopped collecting data.

Information about the participants who were interviewed during this study is presented in Table 3.2. The information relating to the participants' experience as a manager and gender was collected as it was possible these factors may have had a bearing on some findings of this research. However, no correlations of this nature were found while analysing the interview data.

Table 3.2: Overview of sample and participant information

No.	Pseudonym	Date	Responsible for	Experience as a manager (approx.)	Gender
RP1	Anna	02/08/2018	Professional services	15 years	Female
RP2	Beth	15/06/2018	Professional services	20 years	Female
RP3	Alan	29/06/2018	Professional services	20 years	Male
RP4	Brian	29/06/2018	Front line services	20 years	Male
RP5	Carol	08/08/2018	Front line services	15 years	Female
RP6	Clive	20/07/2018	Front line services	5 years	Male
RP7	Debbie	27/07/2018	Front line services	15 years	Female
RP8	Elaine	15/06/2018	Front line services	20 years	Female
RP9	Derek	15/06/2018	Professional services	10 years	Male
RP10	Edward	17/08/2018	Professional services	20 years	Male
RP11	Geri	22/06/2018	Front line services	10 years	Female
RP12	Harriet	20/07/2018	Professional services	20 years	Female
RP13	Ingrid	17/08/2018	Professional services	15 years	Female
RP14	Judy	20/08/2018	Professional services	5 years	Female
RP15	Faruq	29/06/2018	Front line services	20 years	Male
RP16	Karen	03/08/2018	Professional services	5 years	Female
RP17	Gurpreet	20/08/2018	Professional services	20 years	Male

3.8 Ethical considerations

When assessing the ethical issues involved in this research project, the researcher has considered the wider legal and moral duties (O'Leary, 2017) with respect to the individual participants, their employers, professional organisations and society generally. This research was conducted in accordance with the principles set down in the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2015) Ethics Guide which meets the University of Chester's requirements and provides a framework of ethical practice that is expected of institutions and individuals who conduct research in a business subject area. The researcher has assessed that the research does not pose any physical or psychological risk or cause harm to the participants based upon the principle that no children or vulnerable adults will be permitted to be involved in the research.

When planning this research, an assessment was made by the researcher to ensure that a) no harm would be caused to participants (including indirect participants) about whom data would be gathered; b) the findings of the research will not cause to anyone; and c) that the research did not breach acceptable academic and professional codes of conduct (Collis & Hussey, 2009). It is likely that the researcher will to have to revisit these questions throughout the research process as and when situations arise that pose potential ethical dilemmas (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). Research at doctoral level must be credible, transferable and dependable (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and must be conducted in a professional manner – an issue of particular importance when the researcher is a practitioner in the field being studied, as encouraged in constructivist research. However, a reflexive approach must be adopted by the researcher to prevent bias on their part and ensure that the research is authentic and the essence of what the participants are saying is captured (O'Leary, 2017). The researcher will apply the principles of Angen (2000) and Fisher (2010) to ensure the quality of the research findings. The researcher reported on findings that both confirmed and disconfirmed what was being reported to further enhance the quality and truthfulness of the research.

In an attempt to develop findings that are truthful, trustworthy and transparent, no financial incentives were offered to anyone who consented to participate in this research (Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2015) and the research was conducted overtly. To ensure that participants were able to give informed consent to participate (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and sign the consent form (Appendix C), information was provided to all participants relating to their role in the research and how their data would be used and kept safe. The confidentiality of all participants will be protected by removing their names and any other identifying features from the published information and data. All information will be held in a responsible, safe and secure manner at all times. Copies of interview notes and transcripts will be made available to the individual participants upon request. It is intended that the interviews will be recorded (audio only) for transcription purposes. Recording will not take place without the participants' express prior consent and all audio recordings will be deleted after written transcripts of the interviews are produced. References or data referring to people or specific organisations will be deleted or anonymised.

3.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has described and justified the approaches and methodology of this inquiry, which followed a constructivist philosophy, relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology. The chapter summarises how the data was collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed to produce truthful, trustworthy and authentic findings that reflect the realities and experiences of middle managers in the social housing sector when managing employee stress.

Chapter 4 – Data Analysis and Findings

In this chapter the data collected during semi-structured interviews with 17 middle managers working in the social housing sector about their experiences of tackling employee stress, will be presented and analysed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and September 2018. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then the transcripts were thematically analysed (Flick, 2014) to identify common themes and their potential causality. The researcher stopped conducting further interviews when no new themes emerged and thematic and priori thematic saturation had been achieved. The data was coded during the data analysis process with coding conventions adopted that were derived from the literature review chapter (priori themes). This chapter is structured to address each of the research objectives in turn, along with the associated themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. Each of the themes presented is supported by direct extracts from the interviews in an attempt to provide credibility and context to the study. The researcher has selected extracts that they believe are the most relevant to the themes and objectives of the study.

4.1 How are middle managers in social housing managing the stress of others?

The literature suggests that taking a proactive approach to managing stress is more effective than reactive approaches, as it reduce the potential for harm at the source. Furthermore, the existing literature argues that workplace stress emanates from the organisation rather than from individual workers. In seeking to explore how they approach managing employee stress, the participants were asked to describe how they tackle workplace stress and the approaches they take.

4.1.1 Taking a reactive approach to managing employee stress

Taking a reactive approach to tackling employee stress was the most common theme to emerge during the interviews, with all 17 participants describing a predominantly reactive approach. The responses provided by participants were varied, and (as would be expected) so were the tactics they deployed as managers. Participants discussed how they get to know members of their team and their character traits and that they remain vigilant to changes in the mood and behaviour of employees as an indicator of their mental well-being. In the extract below, Ingrid describes how she responds to changes in behaviour or individual traits as a way of managing employee stress:

INGRID: If somebody displays those, you know, gets agitated, or starts to display those, um, traits, if you like, then, obviously, I would have a conversation with them. And, we'd go through what their concerns are, and we would discuss that, document it, I would put in place any actions, and then we'd review it.

Using daily interactions like one-to-one meetings with staff as a means of monitoring employee well-being was a reoccurring tactic that participants cited as a means of identifying if someone is struggling. They then take action to resolve any issues that are causing employees stress. In the following extract, Gurpreet outlines how he uses one-to-ones as a way to pick up on issues that are causing an employee stress and how, once an issue has been identified, he takes steps to support the member of staff to resolve the issue.

GURPREET: In terms of managing for others, I hold regular monthly one-to-ones. So, that's individual, face-to-face conversations with every member of staff. I also hold a monthly team meeting with my staff. I also make a point of making myself available, as and when required, for my staff. I'm approachable, I make sure that they know I'm approachable. We have open-plan office arrangements here but even in the days when I used to have offices, the

door would always be open, type of approach. I think I always nip things in the bud fairly early and my approach isn't to be punitive in any way, it's to support.

4.1.2 Focusing on individual workers experiencing stress at work

Taking action when individual workers are experiencing stress or displaying signs of being stressed was another common theme identified, with all participants describing their approach to managing worker's stress as predominantly focused on individual workers. Participants described how, in their experiences, organisations can be reluctant to acknowledge that individual cases of stress are work-related. In the extract from Anna's interview, she articulates her experiences of how stress is perceived and managed as an individual issue in her organisation:

ANNA: I think very much, rather than it being accepted as something that may be a concern for the entire organisation in terms of how the organisation works – this is a bit of a contradiction – it's still thought about as individuals with inside an organisation.

Taking action to deal with stress once employees have indicated that they are experiencing problems was a reoccurring theme in the interviews, as was completing stress risk assessments after a health issue had been declared. In the next extract, Ingrid outlines how she has managed individual cases of work-related stress and also describes how she completes a stress risk assessment and provided support once an employee has reported that they are stressed:

INGRID: We've had quite a few stress cases, and what we tend to see is that, although individuals will identify with it as being work-related, what tends to happen – not in every case – but what tends to happen is there's a mixture of personal and work-related issues that come out of that. And, what we try and do is … the first step is to do perhaps a risk

assessment to say, 'What is it that's causing you that stress?' We go through that, we put some mitigation in place, we put some support in place.

In the following extract Brian talks about using stress questionnaires with individual workers who are already absent from work because of stress-related ill health to try and highlight some of the sources of stress at work that contributed to their ill health:

BRIAN: We can do stress questionnaires to sort of find out where that stress is coming from.

Workload, issues outside of work and existing mental health issues were the sources of stress most commonly discussed. In this extract from Alan's interview, he describes how he has managed cases of individuals experiencing work-related stress and made adjustments at work during their recovery:

ALAN: There was a lady historically here who needed more than I provide as line manager. So, that person was referred to our occupational therapist through HR [human resources]. For others, it's been lower intensity, and they've been able to manage it by taking time off when required, reducing workload, reducing hours, taking more support, changing the shape of the role, getting external help.

In this extract, Clive outlines some examples of cases of workplace stress arising from workload that have been picked up once staff have been absent from work, including some that are linked to long-term sickness, suggesting that the causes of stress have been present for some time:

CLIVE: There's been quite a few, I suppose lower level cases of, of individuals around workload and pressure that haven't persisted throughout periods. So, we've been able to sort of address them or deal with them. But there has been one recently, where it was, it was affecting an individual, the individual was off work, and hasn't returned into their role. So,

that one was a bit more of a longer-term case that we were working on really but it's more common that it comes up where there's individuals at a point in time, are feeling particularly stressed, struggling with workload, have issues and we have to kind of support them as best we can. But quite a few people, those issues kind of come and go, I suppose, throughout the course of the year but occasionally there's, like one recently, there's a case where its ongoing for a while, and has become, you know, is linked to long-term sickness and we've been, we've been working with the individual both like formally and informally as well, a bit of a mix.

4.1.3 Emerging theme: looking for behavioural changes that indicate when workers are stressed

Looking for changes in individual behaviour was described by 16 participants as a tactic they commonly deploy as a way of spotting workers who are experiencing stress and in need of support. Anna describes how she tries to get to know her staff to be able to pick up on changes in their behaviour that might indicate they're not coping. She is also wary that being overly personal with her staff can be problematic, and tries to strike the right balance so as not to cause stress by being overly familiar:

ANNA: So for example when [name redacted] who works for me, he's quite, not loud, well, yes, he's a little bit louder than [name redacted], he becomes quite introverted if he's under pressure. So he becomes quite insular and takes quite a lot of things internally. I notice that quite quickly because if he's quieter, it's really obvious that there's something else going on. [name redacted] another lady who works for me, she becomes quite apologetic for things and becomes quite, 'Oh, I haven't quite done that, I'm sorry,' or, 'I've done this but I don't think it's right,' and those kind of things. I would say that all of them that work for me, I mean [name redacted] has only just started so I don't know her as well. I'm starting to notice her triggers. I try to get to know them personally but appropriately personally if that makes

sense. So I try to understand them a little bit as people so that I notice their triggers and understand what's happening.

The following extracts draw out some specific examples of how participants monitor what they consider to be changes in the 'normal' behaviour and body language of their workers as an indicator that they could be experiencing workplace stress. Carol describes how she is conscious of body language changes as an indicator that one of her team is under pressure or if they start to do lots of work in the evening or at the weekend as an indicator that she needs to support the individual worker:

CAROL: I'm kind of very aware of people's body language. So, I think if somebody was stressed, I'd hope that I'd pick up the signs that they were stressed because obviously, their behaviour could change, they could become a bit manic, so it's watching their behaviours, watching how long they work in the office, whether suddenly they've gone from doing the seven hours to 10 hours a day, or they're logging on excessively of a night or of a weekend. So, it's just being aware of what their usual pattern in, and why has it changed.

Karen outlines how she is conscious of the signs and symptoms of stress and how listening to what her colleagues are telling her is a way that she picks-up on when individuals are experiencing stress or are unwell at work:

KAREN: It probably is that when we start to see the signs and symptoms, or there's any kind of, from our knowledge in HR and line managers, any of the things that are starting to show. So, maybe not saying, 'I feel like I'm under pressure.' Or, 'I'm feeling stressed.' But, 'I don't feel supported.' Or any of the kind of language that might raise alarm bells there.

Gurpreet speaks in some detail about how he looks for indicators that his team are stressed and might need help or support. Interestingly, much of what Gurpreet describes relates to workload issues and potential barriers that staff might be facing:

GURPREET: In terms of how I manage stress, you have to look at what are the indicators for the different individuals because not everybody is the same. There are some common themes and probably the most common theme, that I think I would recognise, people will have what I call a 'too difficult' pile. They'll be doing their job, they'll do all the stuff they can do; they certainly do all the stuff they like doing but then they'll be something that gets put aside because it's in their 'too difficult' pile. Invariably, their 'too difficult' pile starts to grow, starts to fester, things start popping out and biting people on the backside from it. I often say to that particular person, who I know has got a 'too difficult' bowl, 'What's in your too difficult bowl, Dave? Let's have a look. Let's sit down. Let's go through it together. What do you need help with? What do you need barriers breaking down with?' And I just take the view that I'm here to support. So, that's one example. Other people, when they're feeling stressed, go quiet and you have to recognise that, hang on, they're not saying anything, they're not engaging. So, something's bothering them but they're not telling you about it but something's wrong. So, you have to pick up on that.

One-to-one meetings with staff were regularly given as an opportunity that the participants have to pick up on workers who are displaying uncharacteristic behaviours that indicate they might be stressed. Debbie explains how she uses one-to-ones as a way of picking up on signs that staff are stressed and reflects on past experience when she supported a colleague who was suffering and starting a conversation with them to highlight why she thinks one-to-ones are important in managing well-being:

DEBBIE: We've got a monthly one-to-one model of meetings here which I've been quite dogged about keeping those. So there would usually be signs early on with those. When I think back to the guy I had who suffered from, I suppose his was more depression, that was rather obvious because he sat quite near me. I could tell in the way he was disengaging a bit with work so we were able to start having that discussion about work and I could see he wasn't as engaged in what he was doing.

4.2 What do middle managers do to help prevent stress in their position?

There is considerable amount of literature categorising the sources of workplace stress, also referred to as stressors, that can affect the health and well-being of workers. However, there has been little research conducted to date that looks at managing workplace stress from the perspective of a middle manager. During this research, the researcher was particularly interested in trying to better understand which workplace stressors the participants manage in their work and the stress management interventions they might be deploying. Three categories of work stressor emerged as categories of workplace stress that participants try to prevent for their workers. The first was 'intrinsic job factors', specifically high workloads, the second was 'relationships at work' and the third was 'home-work interface'.

4.2.1 Workload

Workload was a stressor category that all participants claimed they actively try to manage. Making plans, monitoring individual workloads during one-to-ones, using coaching techniques and prioritising tasks were tactics that participants said they deployed to identify workload issues before they became a problem. Here Carol talks about using one-to-one sessions and coaching-style open questions to identify and support employees who might be under pressure or struggling with workloads:

CAROL: So, I do monthly one-to-ones with people. I always ask my last question is, 'Do you need any support from me or the organisation?' Obviously, during that time, I would hope that people would raise that they've got some issues about stress. If somebody comes to me, so I've got a manager now who's saying that they're stressed, we'll look at the workloads. So, we'll go through what their priorities are, what they've got on a list of outstanding activities to do, or workload to do, or projects. They will prioritise, but sometimes people prioritise things that actually aren't really a priority, and can wait until they've got a little bit more free time. So, look at the workload, look at the priorities. We offer obviously counselling and things to [outsourced health provider] if you want to go down that route. So,

I can offer them that. I will try and alleviate the stress by taking some little bits of work off them if I can. But it's mainly about managing that workload, and their expectations of what they think's urgent, and what's not.

Ingrid outlines how she adopts planning tactics and tries to prioritise workloads to reduce stress during busy periods:

INGRID: I mean, obviously, everybody feels under pressure, don't they, at certain times, but what we tend to do, what I try to tend do, is if I know that we are going to have a pressured period, because we try and plan for that, and say, 'Right, how are we going to manage that period? It's going to be particularly pressurised. Who's going to do what?' And, we allocate tasks out on that basis.

Changes in law and government policy were commonly cited as a cause of increased workloads in the social housing sector. Because these changes are outside of the control of social housing workers it can be challenging for middle managers to effectively manage the resultant increased workloads. However, Geri describes how she anticipated an increased workload due to a change in legislation, and used existing data to help her make a business case for additional resources and support from senior management:

GERI: Yes, I mean we do regular monitoring of work. That's mainly done through performance indicators that are monthly and then that will be an indicator if there's been a spike of work. For [name redacted], homelessness has doubled in the last four years and we still had the same amount of staff doing it so that work was absorbed. So then it was down to me to be addressing that with my head of service saying, 'Look, we've got no extra capacity yet we're absorbing the work. If we don't do something, this is going to be detrimental to their health.' So then the Homelessness Reduction Act came, the big legislation change, that was a real opportunity for myself and my head of service to really get on board and highlight the issues that we've got.

4.2.2 Relationships at work

Stress arising from poor relationships at work was described by 10 participants as a source they are aware of and actively try to prevent. The participants discussed a range of tactics that they deploy to try and maintain positive relationships among colleagues. Getting to know the behaviour patterns of staff so that potential relationship issues can be prevented was one such tactic. Here, Beth describes how she was able to use her understanding of a particular member of staff's personality during a potentially difficult meeting to limit the impact on him and his colleagues:

BETH: There is one guy in particular who definitely, he always says he's a pessimist about everything, I tend to feed him little bits of information earlier than other people because I know I'm going to have to manage how he takes it. So, not from a mollycoddling point of view, but more from a point of view of, if you're in a bad mood, you're going to bring everyone else down. I need you to understand what's happened, it's not bad because we're going through a restructure, it's like what's happening is not bad, it's for a good reason, it's so we can get bigger. But if I can manage his mood, it almost helps the others because he's quite a big character in the group as well.

Instilling a supportive culture and making sure that her team have the key information they need to do their jobs is a way Elaine tries to prevent relationship issues and stress at work:

ELAINE: Well, so think about the things that might happen, but also to make sure that we are supporting each other. So, even though they're very disparate areas of work, we do support each other, we do take phone calls, we do take messages, we do, we have handovers where people are away. So, we know that what's likely to come up, and then if something extra comes up, we can then deal with it. So, one of the managers on leave this week, but was only off for four days, and so, it's not worth doing a two-page handover, but I said, 'Can you bullet point which staff are in, which staff are on leave, what issues are

currently outstanding, so we know what might come up, and any key things that you're aware on the day before you go.'

4.2.3 Home-work interface

Home-work interface (or work-life balance) was a source of stress that seven participants talked about being conscious of as middle managers. The interview extracts below illustrate how the participants go about trying to reduce stress arising from home-work interface issues. In this extract, Beth describes how she makes sure that she is fair with her staff by recognising that sometimes they are expected to work longer hours to meet the needs of the business, and that staff sometimes need that time back:

BETH: I think it's just that give and take. We've had open evenings where we're looking for new suppliers, like new subbies and what's interesting is, they were very much eight till four, the previous manager, one of the managers would be, it's 4 o'clock, everybody out, which I find ridiculous. Now I've noticed more and more if someone is just finishing something, they're not rushing off out and when we've had the open evenings, that have gone on till 6 o'clock at night and we've had them on a Monday and a Wednesday night, nobody has asked me for the time back. Because they know if they've got an appointment to go to or one of them is having a sofa delivered or something, it's swings, and roundabouts isn't it? If you need to do that, then do it.

Other participants described how they try to be flexible and supportive when staff have personal issues, to reduce stress that might arise from balancing the demands of home and work. Here, Derek describes how he recognises the need to be supportive of staff when they have problems at home to deal with and that during these periods staff might not to be able to operate at full capacity:

DEREK: So, I think if people are really struggling, because we're talking about work-based stress here, but people can bring stresses from their private lives into work, and it manifests

itself in the work environment. It's not always, we don't operate in isolation. So, people may go through difficult bereavement, divorce, whatever it is, and trying to keep the work on target when they're struggling in a private capacity, you can't, you don't just leave that baggage at the door. So, it's understanding actually this person's going through a bit of a difficulty. We just need to manage the, we can't influence the external pressures, but we can certainly influence what's going on internally and realising that for a period, they're not going to be as fully engaged as they, or fully up to speed with strength as they would normally be. So, there's issues there as well.

4.3 What do middle managers do when stress appears?

Much of the literature concurs that there are three categories of stress management intervention (SMI) that can be adopted by organisations and managers to remove or reduce the impact of workplace stress on workers. Furthermore, much of the existing research argues that primary SMIs, which are intended to remove workplace stressors, are the most effective in managing stress and are most desirable, whereas secondary and tertiary SMIs, which are intended to reduce the impact on individuals or to help individuals once 'damage' to health has occurred, should be adopted sparingly.

4.3.1 Reliance on secondary and tertiary SMIs to mitigate workplace stress

The use of secondary SMIs to help individuals and groups cope with or mitigate the effects of work-related stress was described by three of the participants. These interventions tended to be organised by the social housing organisation rather than the individual participants in their capacity as middle managers. The secondary interventions discussed during the participants' interviews include exercise and activity classes, well-being and mindfulness sessions, along with days when free fruit is provided for staff. During her interview, Beth talked about some of the well-being initiatives that her employer has started to run; however, she makes an interesting observation that some staff might not be keen to take part in some activities and that perhaps a more varied well-being programme might be more successful:

BETH: They do stuff that's to improve your mental health, they do a lot of fruity Fridays, well-being and that sort of stuff, but I think people can get a little bit like, it's being rammed down your throat and I don't think … it's almost like, 'Oh you've got to join in jumping on a beanbag,' and it's like, 'I'm not jumping on a beanbag, that's not my thing. If you introduce a library, I might be more interested, I'll go and read a book'. I think it's very difficult to get that pleasing everyone, isn't it?

Elaine also describes how exercise and activity days along with mindfulness sessions are offered to workers, but also reflects that a broader well-being programme would be beneficial to encourage greater participation and accessibility for employees:

ELAINE: It's great to have exercise days and activity days, but some people aren't going to be able to do [them]. And we do have mental health stuff as well, so well-being sessions and mindfulness and all the rest of it. It's great to have all that too, but I think it'd be good if we could broaden the base of what we offer.

Tertiary interventions intended to help individual workers already experiencing the effects of stress at work were discussed by 10 participants during their interviews. Home visits to workers who are absent from work with stress-related illness was a commonly occurring intervention discussed during the interview. Brian talks about making home visits to employees when they are off sick as a way of supporting workers, along with making referrals to occupational health and counselling.

BRIAN: [employee name redacted]'s manager will go and do a house visit to him or home visit, have a chat with him, and explain what we can do as a company to support him. For example, we can link him up with occupational health, might refer him through to counselling, we can do stress questionnaires to sort of find out where that stress is coming from.

Tertiary interventions provided by external occupational health services and employee assistance programmes (EAPs) were a commonly used intervention discussed during the interviews. Services such as counselling and CBT were highlighted as being available to the participants to refer their staff to once they have started to be unwell or are unable to cope. Ingrid describes the types of tertiary intervention that she can offer individual workers who are experiencing issues as a result of work-related stress:

INGRID: We might do an occupational health referral, they might be referred for some counselling, or CBT. So, it's about identifying it, trying to put some mitigation in place, and what action we are going to take to support them moving forward.

Similarly, Carol talks about the counselling services that she can refer her staff to. She also talks about flexible working, temporary role adjustments and special leave as ways that she can support workers in the short term, although it is not clear what the long-term solutions might be:

CAROL: We've got [a] counselling service. They're able to have counselling service. We look to flexible working for some people. We've looked at obviously whether we can take some of the role off them for a certain amount of time. And obviously, we've got special leave that we can offer people as well.

The broad range of issues that front line housing staff can face while at work provides some insight into the challenges facing social housing workers. Karen touches upon the breadth of issues that her team face on a day-to-day basis and explains that counselling is available to staff. Interestingly, along with issues associated with delivering services to clients, she alludes to redundancies as something her team regularly come up against. However, it is not clear whether these are redundancies experienced by clients or staff:

KAREN: You're dealing with some really broad topics, suicide, bereavement, all horrible sort of things, redundancies, the really unpleasant side of things. So, it's important that she's got somewhere she can offload. We always talk about this, don't we? So, counsellors are somebody to go to.

4.3.2 Emerging theme: mitigating the effects of stress at work by encouraging a supportive and open team environment

Trying to encourage a supportive, fair and open environment as a SMI to reduce and mitigate stress was described by 13 of the participants. The interview excerpts below provide an insight in to how participants use daily interactions and other management interactions such as one-to-ones to be supportive, fair and open with workers as a way of mitigating or reducing employee stress. In this extract, Alan talks about how he tries to make work a fun place to be as a way of mitigating workplace stress and an open, supportive environment:

ALAN: To start off with, I would say that try and make the workplace a fun place for people, and a team that are open, and that have fun together, and that feel that they can trust and share with each other. So, we have a very open environment, I would say. I'd like to think that if my team were asked about it, they'd say it's a place where they meet friends, where they get mutual support from each other.

Anna supplements her monthly her one-to-ones with weekly catch-up's as a way if being supportive and keeping an open dialogue with her team. She also appears mindful that there is a fine line between being supportive and micromanaging which can actually increase stress for some workers.

ANNA: So I officially have one-to-ones every month with everyone who's directly reporting to me but unofficially I make sure I speak to them all at least once a week away from our desks just for 10 or 15 minutes to catch up on what they're doing. I very much have an open-door policy, not that I have an office because we've got an open office but my team know that they can talk to me when they need to or flag up any concerns that they've got. I try to let people manage themselves, so not really a micro-manager.

Elaine draws on her own personal principals about how to treat people and tries to mitigate stress on her stress by seeing things from their perspective and being conscious of timing when she communicates important messages. Elaine also describes how being a middle manager has caused her health issues and that it can be challenging balancing the needs of workers and her own health.

ELAINE: Well a general principle I follow is that I wouldn't treat anybody in a way I wouldn't expect to be treated, and the positive way of doing that is that I would always assume, I'd put myself in their place really. So, like I said, I wouldn't do bad messages on a Friday afternoon because I may know about their, what they're going home to, I may not. I may not know what else is going on in their life. And I think one of the things I've done in the past as a middle manager which has not been good for my own health is that I sometimes take on board too much of other people's stress and concern. I think, as a manager, you have to have empathy, you have to be able to support people, but you do have to recognise the impact it has on yourself. I mean, it's affected my physical health in the past.

Geri talks about trying to mitigate stress at work by reflecting on why she as a manager might become agitated by the way members of her team behave or carryout their work. She describes how she tries to arrange team building exercises and activities that are inclusive and encourage people to participate as a way of mitigating stress at work.

GERI: I think being caring because actually I do give a shit about every single one of those people. There are people that piss me off in my team but actually they piss me off because they don't do something my way or something. That doesn't mean that my way is the right way but I try to encourage... like our Friday afternoon challenges. Who's participating? Who's not participating in my team on a Friday afternoon challenge? We've had eating doughnuts without licking your lips. We've done portrait competitions of each other. It's ensuring that we all have that fun side. We do arrange nights out. We do have girls going to

the cinema for a girlie flick. We are doing a lot of things outside of work because these are the people that we're spending our lives with so we've all got to get on.

It could be argued that the tactics outlined in this section are similar to those described in the previous section on managing stress arising from relationships at work. However, the subtle but important distinction to be made here is the intended outcome. In this section, the participants are encouraging a supportive, fair and open environment as an SMI, whereas in the previous section they are tackling stress arising from poor relationships at work.

Emerging theme: greater awareness of preventative and organisational approaches to managing stress at work is needed

As highlighted in the data presented so far, the stress management approaches and methods described by the participants were predominantly reactive and focused on dealing with individuals who are experiencing workplace stress. Furthermore, the SMIs the participants talked about were predominantly secondary and tertiary interventions known to be least effective in tackling stress at work. Similarly, adopting organisational stress management policies and proactively conducting stress risk assessments did not feature very often during participant interviews. As such, this research indicates that there is a need for improved awareness of the preventative and organisational approaches to managing workplace stress among the participants and arguably within their organisations. Greater awareness and clarity about collective and preventative approaches to tackling and mitigating the effects of stress at work are fundamental to improving worker well-being and employers discharging their obligations under UK Health and Safety law.

4.4 What influences the approaches middle managers take to preventing the stress of others?

As this study is intended to explore the realities of managing work-related stress from the previously under-researched perspective of middle managers in social housing, participants were asked a range of questions to try and understand what influences the approach they take to managing employee stress. The existing literature and research in the area of workplace stress and the complexities of being a middle manager is vast, and suggests that there are many factors that could be influencing the ways middle managers tackle employee stress. While broadly aligned with the topics discussed in the literature review, the questions asked in this section of the interviews were intentionally vague and open, to encourage the participants to talk about their own experiences. The existing research and literature in this area suggests that there are a number of factors that include the approaches and actions taken by middle managers. The questions asked in this section were intended to explore further why the participants take the approaches to managing stress discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter.

4.4.1 Need for improved training for managers

The need for improved training on being a manager or leader was a factor cited by eight participants, who suggested that they would find training in what is expected of managers and how to fulfil their roles useful. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the participants highlight the need for training in how to tackle workplace stress and manage mental well-being at work. Instead, the participants suggested that further training and development is needed in topics like having difficult conversations and mental health awareness. Elaine discusses why she feels training managers is important, how she feels she received training far too late and why her past experiences have indicated to her that there isn't enough funding or resource allocated to management training. She also alludes to training needs being identified as a result of a particular issue or to address a specific topic, rather than being part of a planned development programme:

ELAINE: People really don't realise how difficult it is to manage. But I think that is a disaster waiting to happen, often, if people are just assuming they can be managers. And also assume that they will have, it's a broad base of skills you need to be a manager. It's not just about knowing your own work. So, in fact, sometimes, that's the least important. So, yes, I have had management training, but I wish I'd had it a bit earlier … I've worked at an organisation where we have very limited training resource, and we had an appalling external training about diversity. And it was so bad that actually it caused more concern than actually addressing any issues people wanted to talk about.

Judy makes an interesting observation that line managers would benefit from more training in people/HR management because the role of HR in most organisations is becoming more strategically focused, leaving managers without the support they need to deal with complex cases.

JUDY: I think, at the outset, it would have been useful to have, from a HR perspective, 'what are they there for', the understanding of that. Because I think I've kind of learnt that as I've gone along, in terms of HR, [they] are there to support you for things. But then that wasn't really made clear, the relationship of that, and only ever being managed, you know, you never get to see that until you're a manager. Because you always would want a bit of a one-to-one with your HR adviser, to say, 'Look, this is what … I know you're only a manager. These are the kind of things that I'm there for,' and then HR probably trying to take a step back from being involved in everything, because managers should resolve things themselves. But that was something, at the beginning, I don't think was very clear.

In contrast, two of the participants described a very different reality and that they did not consider a lack of training to be an issue. Interestingly, both participants worked for the same organisation, suggesting that their employer is more proactive in developing their staff and managers.

Alan discussed the types of management training he has received. He describes a number of short courses targeted at specific topics like coaching techniques, managing poor performance and having courageous conversations. However, he has not been trained in how to manage workplace stress:

ALAN: So, the type of stuff that I've been on training courses for, some of it's been particular to certain roles. So, a lot of technical skills, but in terms of leadership and management of people, it's been motivating, coaching, managing poor performance, courageous conversations, and I've gone on probably one or two courses every year for the last 15 or so years.

Karen talks about the leadership and management training she has received as an HR practitioner:

KAREN: In terms of my own, yes training, I've got an NVQ in management and leadership, and my CIPD Level 7 covered a fair amount of leadership and management skills as well.

4.4.2 Need for more professional support and practical advice when managing employee health

Linked to a lack of training is a lack of professional support and health advice for managers when supporting employees experiencing workplace stress. The existing literature suggests that having limited access to professional support or advice is an issue for middle managers. However, this research found that this was an issue for only five of the participants in the study. While Carol is generally positive about the service she receives from occupational health, she suggests that, having referred employees to them for help in how to manage their stress, she would like more practical guidance on managing stress at work:

CAROL: I think we use an occupational health organisation who are great. And I think they regular reports as in what the person sitting in front of them has told them, and I would like more guidance around workplace issues rather than these individual issues, if that makes sense. So, this individual, and the impact of them coming back to work, and we can do to support them while they're in work. Sometimes you don't get that.

Carol also mentions that the occupational health practitioner bases their report and advice on what they see and hear from the employee sat in front of them. She suggests that this situation can result in a report that is not representative of what is actual happening in the workplace. She feels she would benefit from more practical guidance on how to support staff experiencing stress and mental health issues at work.

CAROL: And then you get this occupational health report, and sometimes you struggle because actually, they've just written down exactly what the person's told them to write down. And actually, that's not right, because that's not what they're telling you in another conversation when you see them. So, I think it's more structured, and more workplace evidence in the occupational health rather than just taking what somebody says in front of them. Because it's easy to say, 'I'm stressed,' isn't it? But actually, what is your stress? It's finding that background, isn't it? What are you stressed for? What triggers your stress? What do you think we could do to alleviate it? Do you need any … is it physical, is it mental, or it's that type of, so it's more evidence-based.

Elaine raises a similar point to Carol about the limitations of the advice that occupational health services can provide, and states that middle managers like her need more detailed guidance and support in putting the advice into practice:

ELAINE: We have occupational health here who actually do do that with people, so that the first thing to do here would be to refer people to occupational health. And we have had some of my team who have been to see occupational health and have had that kind of

questionnaire, but I've not ever actually done them. Sorry, I'm smiling, because yes, I have, but it's usually not very directive, which I understand why it can't be. But sometimes, that's what you need, you'd actually like someone to say, 'Yes, we need a return-to-work plan. This is what it looks like and this is what you need to do.' And obviously it can't always be that directive. Sometimes it's quite vague, and you have to interpret it in a way that works for the individual and the organisation.

4.4.3 Emerging theme: using personal experience of mental illness and observing other managers' practice

A process of drawing on their own personal experience of mental illness and of witnessing how other managers behave to inform their own management practice was described by 10 of the participants. This was a new theme to emerge during this research. The excerpts presented in this section illustrate how participants have interpreted the behaviours and practices they observed in other managers to improve their own performance. Edward makes an interesting point about how he does the opposite of what a previous manager did:

EDWARD: I wouldn't work for him because of how bad he was. I base my whole leadership style against everything what he does. Because of how he was … it was horrible. Why would you treat your staff like that?

Judy's past experiences of being managed by others appears to have made her a reflective manager:

JUDY: I think I've taken a lot on board from when I have been managed by people, and how certain situations have made me feel how I feel, like if a situation has been handled quite well. So, through good and bad management, myself, I suppose, and you just take it in.

Gurpreet discusses how he tries to avoid what he refers to as “mistakes that others are making”, “power-freakery” and “micro-management” tactics that he sees other managers using:

GURPREET: I saw my successes compared to some managers who did things a different way. So, yes, I’m definitely on the right track here and I don’t think I make the mistakes that others are making. I see a lot of issues around power-freakery. I see a lot of issues around micro-management. I’ve never seen good outcomes from those, so I avoid it. I just keep going with the things that work.

Anna reflects on what she feels other managers should have done for her when in a more junior role, and how she uses this in her own practice as a manager:

ANNA: I think, if I’m honest, I try to do to them what I kind of wish someone had done for me earlier in my career so that I was better placed to manage the stress, if that makes sense.

A role model earlier in Brian’s career has clearly influenced his behaviour and leadership style in his everyday interactions with his team:

BRIAN: I learnt so much off the other guy, and then our manager at the time, he was a good manager, he wasn’t into paperwork, reports, performance management, that side of it, but he was a good man, he’d look after the person. So, I think that’s what I used to see.

Elaine provides an insight into how previous managers have supported her by helping her find solutions to issues she experienced and how she tries to adopt a similar approach as a manager now:

ELAINE: Looking back over previous roles, I can name the managers that I name as good managers because they've been supportive. And that hasn't meant they've just taken the stress away – they've expected me to come up with solutions – but in a way that enables me to do that rather than the same as your problem, go and sort it, which I've also had.

Geri provides a startling insight into how many poor managers she has experienced in her career and how she is determined not to treat her staff the same way:

GERI: I've only ever had two decent managers out of about seven that I've had but I have to say that it's given me the opportunity to build the person I am as a manager because you look at them and think, 'I'd never treat my staff like that.' So I can learn from that.

Personal experiences of mental health problems influencing how participants go about managing other employees experiencing stress or mental ill health at work also emerged during this research. Alan gives an account of how his own experience of mental illness influences his management style and provides a heartfelt account of an incident he witnessed in which other senior managers were discussing a colleague experiencing mental health problems and how he was shocked at the tone and content of the discussion:

ALAN: I think, having been through challenging times myself, I know everyone's different, and it might look different from one person to the next, but I think I've got a reasonable understanding, and some other friends and family have suffered historically of how it can manifest itself, and what can be done to help. I remember being in the senior management team meeting where a fairly derogatory comment was made about somebody with mental health issues. Said in a jocular fashion, as if to lessen the blow, but that still irritated me.

Beth describes how having a couple of good mentors helped her develop her management style and approach. She also talks about her own mental health issues and how these definitely influence how she manages people. Beth is clearly very reflective as a result, and warmly notes that she is conscious of the fact the she might be "mothering" people at times:

BETH: I've been pushed into roles by people, I've had a couple of really good mentors in my working career and they've given me advice and, oh go and do this and you just take it on board and you work the way that they've worked because they've been good role models really. I think I probably know the people a little too much, but I've had mental health issues previously and I think I wouldn't want anyone else to go through that, it was horrible … So, I do tend to probably mother people a little bit too much.

This finding suggests that middle managers could be attempting to overcome a lack of training and awareness about managing workplace stress, which is surprising given that only eight participants raised a lack of training in this area as being an issue for them. It could be argued that these participants are opting to using their own experiences and observations about other managers' practice because there is a need for improved training and guidance in this area.

4.4.4 Emerging theme: need for peer support and forums to reflect and discuss complex issues hindering middle managers

The need for improved peer support and access to forums to reflect on complex issues was another new theme to emerge from this research. This theme was discussed by 13 of the participants in the context of their role in managing employee stress at work. Having a mentor, and having a colleague to discuss complex issues with, was a reoccurring topic in the interviews. In her interview, Judy reflects that when she first became a manager, she was offered a mentor, but nothing came of it. During the interview it appeared that Judy

considered this to be a missed opportunity that she would have found having a peer to talk to beneficial when taking on her first managerial role.

JUDY: Probably having a mentor, because at the beginning it was mentioned to me that… I think even my boss had someone in mind, but then it never really came to anything. But someone on your own, that first step up to being a manager, having that someone to go to who is on the same level as you and has been through a similar journey.

Elaine discussed a time in her career when she provided support to a peer who was experiencing mental health difficulties at work and didn't feel willing to declare it. Elaine's narrative brings to the fore the benefits that more peer support could bring for both managers and the organisations they work for:

ELAINE: There's somebody I worked with at a previous place, so I knew had mental health difficulty at work and had problems that she hadn't declared. So, she'd shared with me, and the way we dealt with that really was I said to her, 'If ever you're…,' because she wasn't really in my line managing structure, she was a peer. I said, 'If you ever feel that you need to have some time away or if there's a potential crisis coming up, just come and find me.' Which worked okay if I was around, but if I wasn't, and there were a number of times when I wasn't around, that it quickly became clear to the organisation who didn't take a positive view, and she ended up leaving basically, she was encouraged to leave. So, the mitigation didn't really work in that situation. So, on reflection, I wish I'd encouraged her more to either share earlier on with the organisation, because then I think they wouldn't have taken such as an extreme approach, or to look elsewhere for work.

Comments made during or just after their interviews suggest that the participants (and other middle managers) would benefit from a regular opportunity to discuss issues in safe

space. For instance, Edward found the interview useful as an opportunity to vent and be listened to, something that as a manager he feels he doesn't get to do very often:

EDWARD: It feels I've vented a little bit, if I'm honest. You've given me the reassurance it's not going to go anywhere. You're talking to other people. You've listened to many people, I assume. I think you'll see a common theme if I'm totally honest but I'll see when your paper comes out.

Other participants talked about the interview process as an opportunity for them to talk. Just after her interview, Anna said that she found that just having opportunity to talk to someone as helping her to put things in context and get a few things off her chest:

ANNA: I think [this interview has] helped me put some context to some things. It's helped me get a few things off my chest which is always nice. But yes, I have very much so, thank you.

Similarly, Carol said that she found the interview a thought-provoking process and an opportunity to reflect the past six months, indicating that she doesn't often get the time or space to do this:

CAROL: It was interesting, you made me think.You made me think about stress, and you made me think about the change we've just gone through, and the stress levels. If you just see me before Christmas, if you'd have asked me these questions before Christmas, you'd have got completely different answers. So, it's quite funny, because I come into post last September, and for six months, I was thinking, 'What the hell have I done?' So, yes, so, no, you've actually probably got me at a very good settled time where I'm kind of settled into my role and know where I'm going and what I'm going wrong with.

Reflecting on the interview, Debbie said she found it a positive experience that is she is lacking in her own professional world:

DEBBIE: I found that quite cathartic.

Derek echoes comments made by other participants: that the interview was a thought-provoking experience, and that he doesn't often get an opportunity to talk to other people about his work and being a manager:

DEREK: It's been really thought-provoking, that's for sure, because you sort of do it on a day-to-day, you don't often sit back and get questioned about this aspect.

4.5 What tensions and challenges are experienced by middle managers when managing employee stress?

The existing literature highlights that there are a number of internal (organisational) and external factors that can cause tensions and challenges for middle managers. In an attempt to better understand the realities of the participants, they were asked about the challenges and tensions they experience in their roles.

4.5.1 Organisational sources of stress, challenge or tension for middle managers in social housing

The wider literature on workplace stress agrees that sources of stress at work emanate from how the organisation is managed and the cultures and behaviours that exist within it. Furthermore, UK law and the wider literature on workplace stress expect that as sources of workplace stress emanate from within the workplace, they can be effectively handled by senior management. This research found that the participants experience some of the categories of workplace stress defined in the literature along with other sources of stress that are currently underexplored in existing research in managing workplace stress in social housing.

4.5.1.1 Position between senior and junior colleagues as a source of stress for middle managers

Being 'in between' was discussed by 10 participants as being a source of stress at work. The common issues expressed by the participants related to delivering difficult messages from senior management and their role in mediating between junior and senior managers. Elaine describes how she has to deliver difficult messages from senior managers to staff and customers and remain positive, even though she might not be overly enthusiastic about the messages herself:

ELAINE: I think that the middle management role, I mean, most of my experience, I have had senior manager roles as well, but the middle manager role is particularly difficult because of the squeezing, because often you're having to pass on difficult messages with obviously making sure that that's done is a positive way to staff and to customers, but you have to obviously stick with the sort of party line because that's the point of being in that role. So, you're often absorbing the flak from below, and from above, and trying to keep both sides happy. So, it's a classic.

Judy explains how she has to mediate between her managers and team, and finds herself having to enact strategic decisions with her existing staff who often don't have the capacity to deliver. She discusses the challenge of going back and forth between the two groups in order to keep both on board:

JUDY: I suppose I am, like, a mediator between my boss and the work stream coming down, so I didn't … I need to have a good idea of what my team are doing, and their capacity. So, if there are new initiatives that are coming through and down the chain, I'm there to say, 'Well, you know, this is going to be an issue resource-wise,' so the team aren't getting too bombarded. And I would also include them in any project work that is up-and-coming, so they could have that input into, 'Well, you've got to think about A, B and C, and resources to do this,' so there is, kind of, that buy-in. There are some times when some things have to happen, no matter what, but then it's just about realigning resources, I think, across the team, working out how we can make it work.

4.5.1.2 Organisational culture and behaviour as a source of tension for middle managers

Organisational culture and behaviour was discussed by 10 of the participants as something that was problematic for them. In her interview, Beth recalls how she felt when she witnessed a colleague with a mental health condition struggling and not being supported by

her manager. Beth's emotional response to the situation and the actions she took were influenced by her own personal experience of a similar mental health condition. Her heartfelt account of the situation highlights how the behaviour of others and the culture in a workplace can have wide-reaching consequences for employees at all levels of the organisation:

BETH: We've got a lady in one of the other teams and we quite often discuss which medication you're on for panic attacks and stuff and hers was very different, she had hell going on. She was going through an awful time at home and we were on the same tablets that knock you quite stupid and we were saying … I said, 'I take mine at night and then I can sleep, if I don't feel well I want to sleep, that's it, just leave me alone,' and she was saying she has to take hers in the morning because she can't sleep at all but then she has to have a sleep after having it. She was managing to come in later but working later because they have really bad side-effects and it just shocked me a little bit, the way that people were treating her because I suppose I've got the empathy because they were the same tablets that I'd had. People don't necessarily want you to know what's going on in their lives. I think panic attacks are a perfect example. You can control it, necessarily, you can't really see anything, other than I just want to get out the building if I'm having one, just leave me alone.

Tensions and challenges experienced by middle managers when delivering projects or operationalising strategy were also discussed during the interviews. Derek discussed his experiences of managing a high-profile project, and how the poor behaviour of other managers caused problems for him:

DEREK: The project was high profile, it wasn't straightforward, it was trying to get a lot of ducks in a row when those ducks weren't, the managers weren't behaving, and we've got a very, a deadline to work for. So, I mean, as the project progressed, so the stress wasn't there at the beginning, it was as it ramped up, and I think there was a sense of taking ownership too much, taking it too personally, really, that triggered it.

4.5.1.3 Leadership styles and strategic direction as a source of stress for middle managers

Poor leadership and lack of strategic direction were discussed by around a third of the participants. This was a little surprising given the extent of the literature and research highlighting the links between poor leadership, lack of strategic direction and stress at work. Predominantly the issues raised during the interviews related to the influence that leaders have on organisational culture. Elaine commented on how the leadership and culture of an organisation can act as a barrier to middle managers raising concerns, because she knows she can't necessarily change the minds of senior members of staff:

ELAINE: It's about the leadership of organisation. If you're in an organisation where people generally want to hear ideas, which I think is quite rare, that's a lot easier. Or I think usually my experience has been that in certain areas, it's okay to raise ideas, other areas are different in how it goes. Somebody at the senior level wants it to happen, and sometimes it's just going to happen whether you like it or not. So, I think it's knowing which battles to fight, really, isn't it, as well. And remembering that I am only a middle manager role. So, I haven't actually got, I mean, it's not my place, if you like, to win some battles. I can raise the issue. Sometimes I'll push and push and sometimes I'll think, 'This isn't worth pushing because it's not going anywhere.' Or I won't even push in the first place because I know very clearly the organisation's doing this whether you like it or not.

The behaviour of leaders and the effect it has on others was another commonly discussed topic during the interviews. Edward described how the way one director had handled a particular matter had negatively impacted their working relationship:

EDWARD: The thing that really disappointed with the whole episode of being told to apply for a job which was done externally which I thought was quite strange when I could have had the chance, in my eyes, as an interim. Being told in a room with four people that there's opportunities in the business and to be told by the recruitment agency that I've not been successful when my manager couldn't be bothered to come down from his ivory tower and

tell me himself. That was five or six months ago now. As I say, that was the turning point for me and I am a little bit bitter about it. But we've been through two audits since then. Performance has never been better. It's not affected my work one bit. I've given 110 per cent, I've worked exactly the same hours. The only difference is I've got a new job that's bigger and better, and more responsibility, and more pay. To add insult to the whole thing, I told him, we shook hands, 'Congratulations, well done, you deserve it, you're excellent and what you do.' Thanks, I know that already because it's there for everybody to see. He then advertised my job at more money than what I'm getting paid. So I think that's a little bit sad and I'm not going to say anything about that. But I certainly won't ever work for him again. I know that he will probably need me when I leave and that help might not be there. It might be, or it might not. The following day I put my notice in and he asked into a room and he asked me what I wanted to stay and what he could do for me. I looked at him and I thought, 'How do you answer this question? What do you want, what don't you want?' I said, 'Nothing, but thank you very much.' And that was the end of that conversation as well. Because I wasn't good enough the day before for anything. But the day afterwards, I was. And I haven't got enough experience but I've got more experience in industry than he has because I'm three years older than him.

In contrast, three of the participants talked about having positive experiences of leaders within their organisation. It should be noted that these participants work for the same organisation, and therefore it is not inconceivable that this organisation has a particularly good team of directors. The extract from the interview with Karen provides an insight into her relationship with her director, and how she feels that the culture of the organisation emanates from the chief executive:

KAREN: My director's awesome. I think, to be fair, I've learnt how to be from her, from replicating her behaviour and actions, yes. And I do think as well, that is a part of the culture here as well. So, our chief executive is the same above her. So, she, everybody has a chief exec induction in their first week, and they know that that approachability is one of our

values, and it's very much a door's open policy. So, people know from that, the get go, that's how we do things around here, and there'll always be that support, or you can approach people at any time, even if you're busy, it's very people-oriented, and I definitely adopted that.

4.5.1.4 Lack of authority and influence over organisational strategy and planning

Lack of authority and influence over organisational strategy and planning was discussed by two participants. Given the existing literature on the topic, it was surprising that only two of the participants said they felt they lack influence in relation to strategic planning decisions. The existing literature suggests that lack of influence and authority are sources of stress for middle managers and that organisations can benefit from involving middle managers in strategic planning. During their interviews, participants were asked about the scope of their roles, and whether they are able to influence strategy and planning. The following extract suggests a lack of influence. Anna describes how senior managers were unwilling to listen when middle managers raised concerns about staff well-being and stress:

ANNA: Those conversations aren't always very helpful when what you're trying to say is quite valid in terms of the whole organisation, not just the people who work for you. So saying people are tired and maybe taking too much on at the moment, I think it's the same anywhere.

Faruq suggests that she accepts strategic direction from above and does not challenge changes she is asked to deliver. Rather, she receives pushback from junior workers and has to find ways move forward with the work she has been given:

FARUQ: I think I accept very easily that something has just got to happen, and I'll just get on and do it. Then it's just that translation to the team, because they are probably more the ones… especially a couple of individuals who don't like change and want to grasp onto the past around, 'Well, we did it like this before. Oh, we had this conversation 10 years ago' –

those kind of comments, where it's, like, not productive. So, this is that fine line again of being, 'Well, no, this is happening, but I recognise what your concerns are.' So, it's about phrasing that in project meetings, and being firm that, 'This is going to happen, and we need to find the easiest way to do it, and you are the key to that,' and getting them involved in it.

Encouragingly, five participants suggested that they feel able to influence strategic planning and their superiors' decision making. The next extract indicates that Beth is actively consulted and involved by senior management on a major change programme:

BETH: Our assistant director who we report into has just left the business and they've brought an interim one in who happens to be the same person who was brought in to do a review on our business to reorganise it because he works in a housing association that's a lot bigger than ours and he's got a housing background. Now I think that's a really good thing because actually now, not only is he going to give us the ideas of where we're going wrong or what we need to do but he's going to have to put in place, which you don't often get, do you? It's normally, some bigwig on a lot of money will come in and do it and then go away and you're like, well what did that mean, and I don't understand what that is. It's like learning some sort of weird dance, isn't it? So yes, I think it's great he's been brought in and now he's actually going to be our director for that time, but the interesting thing is, when he … he asked to see people, so we were told it was happening, it was very much it's happening to you, then we were asked to nominate people that he should see within the team, which is good. Literally I got him to everyone bar our drivers but only because the manager for the drivers went and I thought they might feel a bit uncomfortable. I said to the manager for the drivers, everyone had a big meeting because it's three departments, so everyone had a big meeting where everyone was told about it and everyone was included it in, then they went away, then we set up the meetings for him to speak to people.

This next extract from the interview with Alan highlights how the board of his organisation check with middle managers to make sure they have the support and resources they need to do their jobs:

ALAN: The board will always ask when we do something new, 'Have you got the right resource levels in for this? Do you need some more support? What can we. So, that's one way, but then once we're actually in the heat of the situation then do?' And they generally get open answers from members of staff at other meetings we'll have things like temperature checks, surveys that will go out, and just see it's a mood, what we think it is. We have a staff forum that provides a channel for people to raise concerns. Yes, I think we do it quite well.

4.5.2 External sources of stress, challenge or tension for middle managers in social housing

During the interviews, a number of new themes emerged relating to external factors that participants found challenging or increased tensions in their roles. Although external sources of stress have been cited in the existing literature, this research has uncovered a number of external sources of stress that appear to be specific to the social housing sector and that have not previously been investigated in relation to middle managers and their experiences of managing stress. The external factors discussed by the participants appear, predominantly, to emanate from changes in government policy and an expectation for social housing organisations to deliver a range of services that were not previously considered within the remit of this sector.

4.5.2.1 Emerging theme: actual changes in government policy as a source of stress in social housing

Changes in government policy and the uncertainty that can arise from these changes were discussed by 14 of the participants as being challenging and a source of tension. Specific issues relating to the ongoing changes the government expects from the social housing sector and how the sector attempts to respond to changes in government policy were frequently discussed. During his interview, Edward describes the cyclical nature of the trends and viewpoints that can affect those working in the social housing sector:

EDWARD: It's very cyclical I find, everything is cyclical in life and it's what the flavour is at the moment. So we went from councils to ALMOs [arms-length management organisations] because that was bang on trend, wasn't it? And then all of a sudden all of the ALMOs are taken back into council and we went through Decent Homes, we went to outsourcing everything and then all of a sudden we're bringing everything back in house.

National changes in government policy, such as welfare reforms and rent reduction requirements, have had an impact on those working in the social housing sector. Derek highlights how welfare reforms and changes in government policy and can be challenging to managers in social housing:

DEREK: We touched on welfare reform, it isn't actually being, it's not turning out to be, it's creating as many problems as it is solutions, and I think we've got a very tight majority. Social housing is quite political. It's quite policy-led because of the client group that we house and the welfare bill. So, it's always going to be political. And so, if we have a change in government and a change in policy, and a change in, that can be stressful for an organisation, absolutely, from a governance perspective. But also, we were inspected to make sure that we're expecting at some point that the inspection regime will come around and that will be quite stressful for a short period

of time. So, those are the issues. If there's some, a dip in the economy that affects our client group. But we've got all those risks covered, horizon scanning. But I think it would be a major shift in policy and housing if we should get a staff election and a new government, I think's probably coming.

The challenges arising from politically driven changes and the uncertainty they can bring were common topics. Uncertainty in the lead-up to the publication of the government's Green Paper on Social Housing are highlighted in this extract from the interview with Carol:

CAROL: We've got pressures that are going to come in which will obviously impact on service delivery and what we can deliver and what we can't. Once the green paper and the government has decided what they're going to do, we're all praying for a change of government so that they probably just go through, but anyway, yes, once we put the green paper out, we'll be able to know where we're at. It's just all the consultation at the moment. We did a lot of work with the National Housing Federation about what our thoughts as an organisation, us as a joint organisation with some of the North West, and then as through the Nat Fed as well of what our thoughts were on account of this needs to work this new rental incomes they're going to develop.

Ingrid provides further context in relation to the social housing sector and how organisations have to respond to these changes. She recounts how changes in policy leading to reductions in rent have been challenging to those working in the sector:

INGRID: If the government decides that … because sometimes they change their mind about housing associations, don't they? About whether they think they are doing a good job or not doing a good job. So, I think it's just a wait and see really, to see if they decide again that they are not doing a good job, which they tend to do sometimes. And, obviously, if they do do that, then that will influence the future of housing associations, won't it?

We've done quite a few restructures but the major one, I think that we did, was in 2015 when we had the rent reduction. So, we had the rent reduction which meant we needed to save – I can't remember how much it was now – significant amounts of money. And, we probably made about 120 people redundant at that time. So, when I first arrived, it was about 650 here, and now there is about 420.

The impact of Universal Credit (UC) on social housing workers and their customers came up during several of the interviews. Anna provides a heartfelt account of the challenges facing the sector arising from the rollout of the government's flagship UC system, and how it has impacted on her customers and tenants.

ANNA: I think the impact of what changed and seeing the impact that UC have had on our customers shouldn't be underestimated. I think that becoming aware that you live in a world or live in an area that has such a high disparity between the richest and the poorest is quite uncomfortable.

There is an ongoing trend of social housing organisations merging in response to government policy and funding cuts. Alan outlines some of the challenges that this has caused for him and his colleagues in the social housing sector:

ALAN: Another big movement in our sector over the last two years has been towards consolidation. So, I've been through my own experience, two mergers, and the world banking, the housing sector shrinks every year. There are now mega players, and my guess is that will probably be the biggest potential driver for stress. In terms of how we manage it, I can't see that there's any external pressures that would change that. But then, I don't think it's necessarily required here.

The challenges facing the sector as a result of increased regulatory oversight by the government's regulator of social housing in the aftermath of the fire at Grenfell Tower was also a common topic. Here, Debbie contextualises some of the challenges and consequences of increased regulatory oversight on her colleagues:

DEBBIE: [The organisation] were downgraded so we were non-compliant. That was what drove the amalgamation. So we're now up to G2 and we're aiming for G1. So landlord health and safety compliance, I would imagine that is a field that given, obviously pre-Grenfell Tower, it was already a pretty major focus for the regulator. There's all the corporate manslaughter act and all the rest of it. I would imagine that area, compared to years ago when there weren't even staff that dealt with it directly, we've got a mass of landlords, that was part of the restructure, was to put resources. So we've got gas, fire safety, that team is a big team. Whether that will stay like that forever, I don't know. Some of that will be related to our downgrade but a lot of it is just reflecting the sector generally, they've pretty much all thrown loads of staff at landlord health and safety. I suppose the other side which links to it a bit, and you can see in a lot of the regulatory stuff lately is data quality. Again, that's where the team that I had years ago, nobody really cared. Our access to data wasn't great because there wasn't the investment in infrastructure and IT and now it's coming back around because actually we don't know the property.

4.5.2.2 Emerging theme: anticipated uncertainty and changes facing the sector are a source of stress

When asked about future sources of challenge and tension in the sector, five of the participants said they considered the threat of further changes in policy and law to be an ongoing area of concern. Carol describes how the ongoing uncertainty is a source of frustration for her:

CAROL: Once the green paper and the government has decided what they're going to do, we're all praying for a change of government so that they probably just go through, but anyway, yes, once we put the green paper out, we'll be able to know where we're at.

Ingrid outlines the frustrations caused by the ongoing changes in policy, and uncertainty over what is expected of the sector in the future:

INGRID: I can only think of if the government decides that … because sometimes they change their mind about housing associations, don't they? About whether they think they are doing a good job or not doing a good job. So, I think it's just a wait and see really, to see if they decide again that they are not doing a good job, which they tend to do sometimes. And, obviously, if they do do that, then that will influence the future of housing associations, won't it?

Ongoing welfare system changes (such as UC) as sources of future workplace stress were discussed by five participants. The impacts on customers and society generally were brought to the fore in some of the interviews. The day-to-day effects of initiatives like UC on customers, the sector and wider society came out in these interviews. Anna talks quite openly about the impact that welfare reforms have had on her customers and how this has left her feeling:

ANNA: I think that in some cases people become quite hardened to it which means they don't always fully understand the impact of it until you step back from it and think, 'Oh my God, that's awful'.

Geri succinctly sums up what she considers to be the impact of Universal Credit on the social housing sector and its customers:

GERI: It's just a massive burden, the Universal Credit.

A common frustration among social housing workers appears to be that welfare reforms have not delivered what they were intended to, and that this is creating additional problems. This extract from Derek's interview highlights this issue:

DEREK: Yes. If we, we touched on welfare reform, it isn't actually being, it's not turning out to be, it's creating as many problems as it is solutions.

Increasing regulation and oversight of the sector was something that three of the participants felt would continue to be challenging for the sector and those who work within it. Anna described how she feels that the increasing levels of oversight by the Regulator for Social Housing at a time of continued financial cuts will result in more stress for social housing workers:

ANNA: I mean I think if there's any more cuts, yes. I think that if things continue in the vein that they are then I think it will probably become even more difficult which in turn will create more stress, yes.

Increased focus on landlords' compliance duties was cited by six of the participants as something they felt could increase pressure and changes to working practices in the sector. In particular, respondents talked about how, in recent years, social housing providers have had to take action to improve how health and safety duties are discharged, which has required a change in focus and resourcing. Debbie describes how additional resources have had to be found to improve compliance because of the potential for social housing providers to be downgraded by the regulator:

DEBBIE: So landlord health and safety compliance, I would imagine that is a field that given, obviously pre-Grenfell Tower, it was already a pretty major focus for the regulator. There's all the corporate manslaughter act and all the rest of it. I would imagine that area,

compared to years ago when there weren't even staff that dealt with it directly, we've got a mass of landlords, that was part of the restructure, was to put resources. So we've got gas, fire safety, that team is a big team. Whether that will stay like that forever, I don't know. Some of that will be related to our downgrade but a lot of it is just reflecting the sector generally, they've pretty much all thrown loads of staff at landlord health and safety.

Gurpreet discusses how he and his colleagues are starting to change the way they operate in order to ensuring compliance and how this is a costly exercise in a sector where funding has been cut for over a decade. He also alludes to the pressures on the supply chains that can't fulfil the volume of orders being raised in order to comply with statutory requirements.

GURPREET: There is a need to change the way we operate. There are operational changes that will no doubt come, particularly … and it's already starting. Particularly around fire safety because of the culture of Grenfell and everything at the moment. So, there is going to be diversion. There's no new money in this world, in this sector so it's going to be diversion of funds from what was intended for other activity. So, some of these scheme uplifts might not get done because we're now going to go round chasing every fire door that we've ever fitted and re-testing it and re-evaluating it. We've already started a process of looking at what our risks are in that area. [name redacted] has already, in the last few weeks, asked me to look at saving/diverting several hundred thousand pounds out of other activity to create a brand new, previously undersigned fire door replacement programme, when it kicks off, later in the year.

4.5.2.3 Emerging theme: actual funding cuts and financial constraints as a source of stress in the social housing sector

Financial constraints, budget cuts and reductions in funding were cited by 12 of the participants sources of pressure and stress for social housing workers. As touched upon in previous sections, many government policies have resulted in cuts in funding and reductions

in the rent that social housing organisations are able to charge. Anna highlights the challenges relating to dealing with funding cuts while trying to deliver services to tenants and customers:

ANNA: The sector has become even more challenging in terms of finance and cuts to funding, here personally our management fee hasn't increased in the last five years so we're having to do more with less. I think that everything has become a little bit more competitive and a little bit more challenging. I think that people are, as I said earlier, trying to do more with less an trying to do it to the best of their ability, to continue to shine and therefore potentially get the funding if it becomes available.

Ongoing economic conditions in the UK have added to the financial constraints faced by the sector. In the following extracts, Carol and Elaine both describe the difficulties of delivering services to vulnerable tenants at a time when funding is being cut for this tenant group and housing associations are being required to reduce rent for tenants:

CAROL: We've also got the pressures on funding as well, the funding's being pulled. We've also, especially in my area, we've got the new rent reductions around supported housing shelters. So, we've got all them type of pressures that are going to come in which will obviously impact on service delivery and what we can deliver and what we can't.

ELAINE: All parts of my team are under great pressure, they're going to get under increasing pressure because they're dealing with, as I say, dealing with more vulnerable people who have less support. It's a very depressing future I'm painting, isn't it? There was supporting people funding which was available from the government, yes, so it was stopped because at one stage, the housing associations to could put us in social support as well. And that's gone, basically.

The number of homeless people in the UK has increased over the past eight years, and this has increased the demand for emergency accommodation. During her interview Geri gave an example of how she and her team have had to be innovative in how they manage their emergency housing system and deal with the predicted increased costs associated from the additional duties in the Homelessness Reduction Act:

GERI: Last year we spent £2.2 million on emergency housing. That is a huge amount of money for a really poor council. So it's always been deemed as a corporate risk. We don't want any surprises coming out for them to then pull us over the coals and say, 'What's happened here?' So they knew it was a risk anyway. Then we produced the big report. It didn't get approved until February/March but literally when it did, I hit the floor running. As you can see, I've got the five extra people in post. We're now two months into the Homelessness Reduction Act, the earth hasn't moved for us but without those people, it could have looked very, very different.

4.5.2.4 Emerging theme: anticipated future financial constraints and restructuring as a source of stress for social housing workers

When asked about future issues that faced the social housing sector, ongoing financial constraints, restructures and mergers were anticipated by six participants as being a concern, particularly in how the lack of funding and budget constraints as a source of stress for workers in the sector and how the impact of cuts in others sectors is increasing demand and pressure on social housing providers and their staff. Beth describes the impact of budgets cuts, ongoing restructures and demands to become more commercial will continue to create what could be a 'perfect storm' of pressures that could increase stress for those working in the sector:

BETH: Yes, do you know what, I think the thing is with the social housing at the moment, there's a lot of changes going on and money-wise with budgets and God knows what, the

stress that people are feeling, I think are things that have gone in the commercial world, for a long time … So, I think it's quite hard at the moment because of all the restructures and everything, we've had a lot of it at [name redacted], which they hadn't had before. I think once they come out of the other side of that, it would be a different sort of stress because I think they've got to get more commercially viable and if you look at a lot of big businesses, it's a different type of stress, isn't it? It's time pressures and money pressures but it's not necessarily the same sort of stress that you feel with that because you just get used to doing it and you get into that, this is how the job goes. But I think it's quite a steep learning curve to get there.

Elaine shares her experiences of how the lack of funding in other services in the local area have increased the demands placed on social housing workers to plug the gaps. She describes how her team are caring people, and that they do their best to help their customers even though this situation might be detrimental in the longer term because of the stress it causes:

ELAINE: Well a lot of external services, so the voluntary sector has lost funding massively. So, whereas before, even if you couldn't, even with social housing, take on certain issues, you'd have somewhere to refer people to. Now, it's very, very limited in terms of where you can refer people to. Even if they've got quite severe mental health problems. In the past, you might've been able to get somebody a psychiatric nurse, or you might be able to get the social worker, or you might be able to refer them to an Age UK service or a MIND service. But those services have contracted massively. And if your team are carrying that amount of, because they're caring people, they're caring and concerned about people for who they cannot do anything. That is bound to increase stress.

4.5.2.5 Emerging theme: ongoing restructuring and commercialisation of social housing providers

In an attempt to respond to the changes in government policy and financial constraints discussed in previous sections, many social housing providers have made the often difficult decision to restructure, merge with other organisations or make staff redundant. Another way that social housing providers have attempted to respond to changes in government policy and financial constraints has been to adopt a commercial approach to some of the services that they deliver. While no doubt these decisions have been made with the best of intentions, 13 participants described how they have been a source of pressure and stress for them and colleagues.

Looking at restructuring and mergers first, the extracts from interviews with Carol, Debbie and Ingrid have been provided as they most succinctly summarise the challenges that these managers have recently encountered:

CAROL: I think, that everything organisation restructured, it came as a complete and utter shock to people that they were being restructured, and people didn't deal with it very well for us as an organisation, we've just gone through our first major restructure. I think within the next two years, there will be another one. And I think it's kind of getting people used to that change, so that in 18 months' time when we start another change process is that it's not a shock to them because what we found definitely on the [redacted] area, we call them militant [redacted] because they're quite militant over the Merseyside side, is that they've never ever been to a restructure even though that's normal within a sector at the moment is.

DEBBIE: I think that was very well known that that was very likely to happen, that they wanted to restructure. There was a rationale to it, very clear. I got the rationale because you're moving five organisations into one, there's going to be some saving somewhere. Obviously you're moving services together that had obviously a number of staff that don't

need that. So people knew that was likely to happen. I think that's it, isn't it? It's that slightly, you shouldn't be asking for sympathy from your team but there were times where I used to think, 'Do you not realise this is me as well?' In fact, what became difficult was when they then announced the restructuring and the job put at risk and all that official period, that's very hard then because you can't really update the rest of your team because there's an element of, 'This is about me and my future. I'm not going to tell you all the options that I'm being given,' because that's exactly the same as when it went to their level.

Moving on to the challenges arising from commercialisation of the sector, Brian describes how being more commercial as an organisation doesn't necessarily fit with the culture and values of their organisation, a not-for-profit charity:

BRIAN: We're profit driven. So, all our performance relates back to a budget, and profiles, and profit, and even though we're a social enterprise, we want to make as much profit as we can because that means we've got more money to invest in our charity which is called [name redacted]. So, it's like, the profit's not the dirty word because if we're not making profit, we're not going to be here for long, are we?

This extract from the interview with Faruq highlights the changes required to become more commercial are multi-layered and require a change of culture, process and practice:

FARUQ: Well we're not quite commercial. That's one of the debates at the moment, okay. The only real sort of separate part of the business is [name redacted]. So, we're technically still part of [name redacted], but we are different location down [name redacted]. We are another realm. I mean, before we went through all these changes, we were proportionately, we were the bigger partners, [name redacted], with the employee group, because the reason we had over 125 employees. So, but now, obviously with rationalisation and trying to get more productivity. So, that's always the balance because it tends to shrink, it tends to

pressurise because you're asking people to do actually do more than, do the two jobs for one person, sort of thing.

Karen also suggested that commercialisation of the social housing sector can lead to challenges in recruiting middle managers with the unique skill set and behaviours desired to work in an increasing commercially oriented, not-for-profit social housing provider:

KAREN: It's really difficult in middle manager and above level recruitment as well because in terms of operationally, if they've worked in public sector, that's fine, you can work with that, but actually, as a management and senior management level, that's quite difficult because we want you to be able to demonstrate that you can act commercially, not come and learn it, we need you to hit the ground running, so yes, a little bit hen's teeth sometimes when we go for those kind of ops level manager roles.

4.5.2.6 Emerging theme: quasi-internal organisations causing tension and stress for social housing workers

In an attempt to become more commercial, it is increasingly common for social housing providers to set up their own in-house repair and maintenance services and commercial arms. These 'quasi-internal organisations' can operate as a separate commercial entity and as the internal contractor for the entire organisation. Five of the participants interviewed during this study are directly involved in managing an aspect of a service that is operated as a 'quasi-internal organisation' this in the role of a client or in-house contractor. All five of these participants discussed how this new model can cause stress for workers on both sides of the organisation. This highlights the need for further research in this emerging sector-specific model of working.

Beth is a manager who works as part of an in-house contractor team. She describes how her team experiences role conflict and ambiguity stress as a result of the complex relationship they have with their colleagues, who are also their clients. Furthermore, the staff who work for the in-house contractor are employed on different terms and conditions to their colleagues on the client side. In this extract, she gives an example of how the team are part of a corporate briefing and how a simple message has alienated the in-house contractor staff:

BETH: When it counts, yes and I think that's probably one of the niggles. There's odd times where it happens, and you think, can you not just think before you speak? We have a chief exec brief once a month, so everybody in the business goes to it, the trades have one in the morning and everybody else goes to the afternoon one. It's just at lunchtime and one of the talks at one of them, it's for people to say what they're doing and everything and one of them, they were talking about introducing, rather than having the unions as having people reps in the business and then the point was made, this doesn't include [name redacted]. Well don't announce it at the briefing, if it doesn't include us, don't announce it in front of us because you've basically just said you're all going to discuss about your stuff and we're not.

Brian describes how running a commercial entity within not-for-profit organisation can be challenging because of the way that strategic decisions are made. In particular, he notes that policies developed for the not-for-profit part of the business are hampering the success of the commercial section:

BRIAN: Yes, for the first time this year, we've taken on the home works side of this which is more of the services, the ground maintenance, and we won a big grounds maintenance contract that requires seasonal staff. So, we have taken on quite a number of seasonal staff which is a first for us. We don't normally do that. And we have used as well in the past, we have used for home works zero hours. We used them very successfully. So, for me, if I think we could win some work, because the pressure that's been on the housing business for so

long, they put basically a blanket stop on recruitment. So, every job that was vacated, we had to have a review to say, 'Do we replace it?' There's quite a lot of redundancies across the company in the last few years, but we get, we're sort of coming out that, and we want to grow. It's been quite tricky for me to grow because I can't get people to take the chance.

The situation described by Edward highlights how the client and the in-house contractor can have very different objectives, which can be source of conflict between colleagues working for the same organisation:

EDWARD: It does lead to conflict, definitely. A difference of opinion. I think they've got a different set of agendas. So my agenda is for the business to remain complaint, to keep Sinead out of prison, to keep our customers safe because that's what we all do. It isn't compliance it is property health and safety. There is definitely a swing, we can't say we're compliant anymore we have to demonstrate we're compliant and they are probably not on the same page as we are. They say they are and they want to deliver but now they are very commercially driven and that's their focus.

In the extract below, Gurpreet talks about how the in-house contractor within his current organisation are thought of as a separate business and how it could work better if that barrier were removed and they were treated as two parts of one organisation. In particular, he believes that giving the in-house contractor staff the same terms and conditions as those working on the client side would improve how the two entities interact for the benefits of the organisation:

GURPREET: Here, the [DLO] tends to get treated more as a contractor and that is very much a client/contractor mentality and split. Whereas, the best models that I've seen, the in-house contractor – he's called an 'in-house contractor' not an old fashioned [DLO]; it is part of the same business, part of the same team. It's a partnership arrangement not a client and contractor arrangement. The client side shouldn't be over-policing the in-house contractor.

There should be duplication of resource and duplication of effort on both sides of the fence. So, I prefer to see it as a partnership model where you issue the work and they manage the work and deliver the work. There shouldn't be any need to have an army of police and an army of inspectors and an army of checkers. You're all the same business, you're all the same company, you're all working to the same end. You're all colleagues and you should water down the client/contractor relationship. It is a bone of contention that, more frequently than not, the DLO has totally separate terms and conditions and don't bear any resemblance to the colleagues that they're working for, on the client side, and that can be a bone of contention. Certainly, in terms of all the staff, I believe they should be on the same terms and conditions. Same pay scales, same benefits. I think there has to be a commercial overview and a commercial difference with the tradesmen, with the operatives, if I'm honest. So, it's not unusual for the operatives to be on a different nature of terms and conditions, to be a bit more commercial. If you do end up with operatives on two client-based terms and conditions, that tends to lose the commercial edge.

4.5.2.7 Emerging theme: anticipated continued sectoral and organisational uncertainty causing additional stress in social housing

Continued housing sector and organisational uncertainty as a result of the ongoing changes in policy, financial constraints and restructuring was an anticipated source of pressure and stress described by 14 of the participants. It appears that the sheer amount of change and increased demands in the sector are leading to increased levels of stress experienced by social housing workers. There is also a predictable nature to the changes, which adds to the pressure on some managers who have 'seen it all before'. This extract from Debbie describes the effects that a number of mergers and restructures has had on employees:

DEBBIE: From what I can remember, the briefings we had, although they did stop quite early on, you could bring, not specific one member of staff has said this, but they would ask you, 'What's the general feeling?' We were all pretty honest and said, 'The general feeling is

people are getting fed up and are wandering what's happening and how many jobs there are going to be.' As you say, all it boils down to in the end is just, 'What job am I going to do? What am I going to get paid?' Because they were moving five organisations into one, each of those organisations have been founded differently so all the terms and conditions and pay structures are all different. So there was also this added fear of, 'Well you're going to review all the terms and conditions, aren't you? You won't necessarily go for the most favourable,' particularly given housing generally.

Here, Gurpreet describes how the cycle of changes to the service delivery model has contributed to the ongoing uncertainty and frustrations of those working in the sector:

GURPREET: It keeps coming in and out of fashion over the years. You know, in-house contractors are all the rage and everyone is setting one up and running one and then a few years later it's, 'Oh, no. We'll strip right back and we'll just do the basics and we'll send out all our work to outsourcing.' Then it's, 'Oh, no. Outsourcing is terrible, you can't get the service delivery. We'll bring you back into the in-house contractor.' I've seen that and I've been in social housing for 15 years and it seems to go on a five-year cycle of in fashion and out of fashion and back in fashion.

4.5.2.8 Emerging theme: ethical and moral values as a source of workplace stress for social housing workers

Ten of the participants described personal ethical and moral values as being a source of workplace stress for them and their colleagues. More specifically, the participants intimate that that stress can results from a conflict between their ethical and moral values and the demands and financial constraints being placed upon them. This is a new emerging theme that hasn't appeared in the existing literature on workplace stress in social housing. Many of the staff working sector do so because they believe in the social housing model and take their moral duty to it very seriously. The extracts from Beth and Edward are included here

because they highlight how those working in the sector consider their work as more than just a job, and that they have a desire to provide services to their tenants:

BETH: Projects I've worked on, when I did the regeneration works, which was over … I mean there was 400-odd homes but some of it was blocks of flats and stuff and you got to know people in the area and there was one where there was a lady who I'd quite … she had OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder], but she had quite severe mental health issues and stuff it was like, making sure the contractor was aware that, you need to make sure that hallway is spic and span when you leave at night because they didn't leave their flats while we did the works, they still lived in it. So, technically they were living on a building site, but it was getting to know the personalities and I think when you're doing big projects, that's quite easy, believe it or not, it's when you're doing the odd kitchen or bathroom that it's not as easy because you're in and out so quick, they might not necessarily understand what that person's needs are. Because you can see, if it's not something physical, you can't say, 'Oh yes, she's got one arm that's in a bandage,' or something.

EDWARD: The whole rationale behind it because that's what we're do. a job ultimately. We don't do things for us to say we're compliant and, 'Look at how good we are.' We do things for our customers.

Social housing providers are increasingly expected to house vulnerable tenants who would normally have received accommodation support from specialist service providers like social services or mental health teams. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this situation has evolved out of cuts to other services and because of the prioritisation of resources in other public sector organisations. These extracts from Alan, Clive and Debbie describe how many people working in social housing do so because they think it's a worthy job to do, and how the increase in the number of tenants who are vulnerable is making their jobs more stressful:

ALAN: I think it's the nature of people that come into this sector. And also, yes, potentially the services when inevitably a high portion of our tenants have mental health issues than you would do customers of a bank or a shop, by way of example. So, where you're having to deal with these issues on a day-to-day basis, there's a greater acknowledgement and understanding of the way to deal with them.

CLIVE: There's been an increase in the number of residents that we're getting for general needs properties who have fairly complex needs. And I think the way in which people have reacted, is quite, is different in certain circumstances, I think you've got quite a lot of resilient people, working in housing, who've, especially those who have been in it for quite a while, have faced so many challenging situations, that actually doesn't faze some people. I think people who are new into it, I think, sometimes, its maybe a bit of a shock that they're dealing with certain situations. But, generally as a rule, I think people who work in social housing have quite… we're quite resilient in terms of like dealing with challenging individuals and quite patient, understanding and yeah, as a rule.

DEBBIE: But I suppose the one bit that my team has been insulated against is that there is a growing number of vulnerable tenants with chaotic lives. So whereas our service has changed in terms of what the organisation might want from it, in terms of what the regulator asks for, but actually, if you look back to regulation 10 years ago, we were a much busier team because regulation was much, much heavier.

Elaine provides an insight in to how the increased demands from older and more vulnerable tenants, coupled with diminishing services provided by other community organisations, are a challenge to her and her colleagues:

ELAINE: There's also different demands. I mean, very different, changing demographics, I mean, massive change on demands, expectations. Partly because we're having far more old people now which means that as a proportion of population, there are more

people who are older. So, at the same time, services are being cut. So, there's less support for people who have increasing needs. Most people are okay to live at a reasonably healthy older age, but a significant portion aren't. And they're the ones we're more likely to have in the social housing. As a landlord, we have a responsibility to house people, and maintain their tenancies. But actually, we've lost funding, we would've been able to still offer more support. So, actually, people we're dealing with are much vulnerable than they've been before. Well I suppose, partly because we're having far more old people now which means that as a proportion of population, there are more people who are older. So, there's less support for people who have increasing needs. Most people are okay to live at a reasonably healthy older age, but a significant portion aren't. And they're the ones we're more likely to have in the social housing.

4.6 Chapter summary

The data collected during this research has been presented and analysed in this chapter. This study analysed semi-structured interviews with 17 middle managers in the social housing sector and found, in contrast to the extant literature, that participants predominantly adopted reactive approaches to tackling the workplace stress of individuals and deployed secondary and tertiary SMIs to reduce the effects of stress at work. Specifically, also in contrast to the literature, they tended to focus on managing stress arising from workload, relationships at work and home-work interface. In addition, this study contributes new insights into how middle managers manage stress in practice, such as using their experiences of managing their own stress at work and observing the behaviours and practices of other managers. The study also highlights a number of contemporary stressors in the context of social housing, such as the moral and ethical dilemmas of dealing with vulnerable tenants during a period of ongoing uncertainly, change and funding cuts in the sector. As such, these contributions provide new, practical insights into how managers can manage stress in the workplace.

Chapter 5 - Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

This chapter starts by outlining the overall contribution this research makes to the literature on workplace stress and to management practice. This will be followed by a discussion on the findings of the research before consideration of its implications, after which a number of recommendations based on the findings will be made. The limitations of the research in relation to the wider literature and context of the research will be discussed before concluding with the specific contributions that this research makes to the literature and professional practice. This research makes an original contribution to the literature and what is known about managing workplace stress in three ways. Firstly, the research explores workplace stress through the currently under-researched lens of middle managers. Secondly, the study looks at the management of workplace stress in the context of the social housing sector. Thirdly, the research has been conducted at a specific point in time when data from government and non-government sources report that cases of workplace stress are increasing as the social housing sector is facing a number of social and financial challenges and going through a period of significant change (as outlined in Chapters 1 & 2).

5.1 Findings similar to and supportive of existing literature

During this study there were a number of findings that were similar to or supportive of the existing literature and what is already known about managing workplace stress. In this section these findings will be discussed in greater detail, with particular reference to the aims and focus of this research project.

5.1.1 How do middle managers approach managing the stress of others?

This research found that the participants take a predominantly reactive approach to tackling stress at work. Beresford et al (2018) concur with the existing literature in that reactive approaches to tackling workplace stress are least effective and that organisations should adopt a proactive approach. However, it is understood that the majority of organisations take a reactive approach to dealing with instances of stress when they arise (Di Fabio, 2017). This research also found that the participants deal with individual cases of workplace stress once they arise. These results corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous research, such as Jacobs et al (2018) who states that tackling cases of individual workers experiencing stress is both common and ineffective. It is argued here that recent reports and guidance on tackling stress and improving mental well-being place too much emphasis on encouraging managers to spot workers experiencing mental health issues, to have difficult conversations about mental health, enhance individual well-being by deploying mindfulness, mediation and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) practices and training mental health first aiders rather than preventing workplace stress (Narayanasamy et al, 2018).

While these findings broadly support the existing literature in this area (e.g. Pignata, Boyd, Gillespie, Provis & Winefield, 2016), this study explores the topic from the currently under-research perspective of middle managers, who are responsible for managing employee stress. Nonetheless, it is not immediately apparent from this study why the participants take a predominantly reactive approach to dealing with stress at work. However, it is clear that more needs to be done to increase awareness and application of preventative risk-based approaches. Furthermore, these findings highlight the importance of having clearly defined organisational workplace stress management policies and strategies that adopt preventative, risk-based approaches to tackling workplace stress (HSE, 2018). It is argued here that more needs to be done to encourage employers to adopt organisational strategies

focused on prevention, rather than attempting to help their workers cope and limit the effects of workplace stress on their mental and physical health.

5.1.2 What do middle managers do to help prevent stress in their position?

Despite this research finding that the participants predominantly tackle stress by adopting reactive measures when individuals experience stress, this research also found that there are three particular categories of workplace stressors that the participants said they were aware of and attempt to manage (Pignata, Boyd, Winefield & Provis, 2017). These categories of stressor were broadly the same as the most common causes of stress highlighted in research by the CIPD (2018b). Although the participants were aware of these particular workplace stressors, their approach to managing them was generally not preventative or risk assessment based, as is required in law. It should be noted that other categories of workplace stressor – such as management of organisational change and poor communication – were discussed by some participants, yet they were cited as a source of stress for the participants rather than sources of employee stress that they attempt to manage on a day-to-day basis.

While it could be argued that it is encouraging that the participants attempt to limit the effect of three categories of workplace stressor, there is a risk that other sources of workplace stress may not be being actively managed. It is possible that the increased focus on middle managers being responsible for managing stress has resulted in other categories of workplace stress that middle managers are unable to control and so are not being considered and managed, contributing to the rise in workplace stress over the past decade. As such, the question needs to be asked about where or who in the organisation is considering and managing the categories of stress at work that middle managers are not in a position to tackle. Accordingly, further research is needed to understand more about how organisations manage workplace stress throughout the hierarchical structure to ensure that all sources of workplace stress are being managed.

Workload was found to be a stressor that all participants were conscious of and tried to manage. While some of the participants outlined how they try to reduce stress arising from workloads, the majority of respondents tended deal with workload issues on an individual basis – for example during one-to-one meetings or when workers appear to be experiencing stress as a result of workload issues (Hughes et al, 2019a). The use of coaching techniques to help staff prioritise and manage their own workloads was a tactic that the participants said they used in relation to workload issues. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising, because it could be argued that workloads are a source of work stress that middle managers have an element of control over. However, many of the potential causes of increased workload cited during this research are organisationally or (Lesner, Gusy & Wolter, 2019) externally driven, and so outside the control of middle managers. This further highlights the role of senior management in identifying and mitigating stressors that affect the organisation and the risks associated with expecting middle (or line) managers to manage workplace stress when they lack the authority to effectively mitigate certain sources of stress.

Relationships at work was another category of workplace stress that the participants in this research said they proactively try to manage by getting to know their team and pre-empting situations that could cause problems. While Hewett, Liefooghe, Visockaite & Roongrerngsuke (2018) recognise that negative relationships at work can be a cause of stress, this research found that the majority of participants encourage supportive and open relationships at work as a type of secondary stress management intervention. This will be discussed in more depth in the next section of this chapter. Home-work interface stressors were another category that the participants were conscious of and tried to manage. Flexible working arrangements and making sure that staff got time back for additional hours they worked were given as examples of the participants trying to reduce potential home-work conflicts. These findings are similar to the existing literature on home-work interface stressors in that awareness of these types of stressors is improving because of the drive to improve well-being and productivity (Hughes et al, 2019b). However, they still tend to be

managed reactively when a worker is experiencing symptoms of stress and are easier to manage in some roles than in others (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

This research also found a number of other sources of stress and pressure that are problematic for the participants and their colleagues. These are specific to the housing sector and have not been documented in the literature and research outline in the literature review chapter. These findings will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

5.1.3 What influences the approaches that middle managers take to preventing the stress of others?

This research found that the participants felt that improved training was needed for managers, however this was predominantly general management training and awareness courses that would help them to have difficult conversations about mental health and signpost staff with mental health issues to sources of help and support. This finding is supportive of research by the CIPD (2019) that found that middle managers need more training in how to tackle employee stress at work, given their increasing responsibilities for employee well-being. However, the finding of this study was unexpected because the training needs reported by the participants did not include those related to managing stress at work. There are possible explanations for this finding, such as the need for improved access to professional advice and support for middle managers in dealing with cases of stress at work (IOSH & Management Today, 2019). It is also possible that middle managers are not aware of their own learning needs, and could be attempting to find their own solutions and learning opportunities, a skillset that managers are expected to acquire and deploy. Another significant finding of this research (discussed later in this chapter) suggests that the participants use their own personal experiences and what they observe other managers doing to inform their own practice.

The need for improved and practical professional guidance and occupational health advice was a finding in this study. While the existing literature recognises that occupational health advice and professional guidance is often lacking for middle managers (IOSH & Management Today, 2019), this research suggests a slightly different situation for the participants. The concerns raised by the participants about occupational health advice were not related to a lack of provision, because occupational health services were available to all participants. Instead, the issue raised related to the need for detailed guidance on how to put in place what the occupational health providers were recommending. Employers are increasingly appointing external occupational health/employee assistance programme (EAP) providers (EAPA & Work Foundation, 2016), who are often remotely located. Many organisations (including social housing providers) opt for an externally provided service because it would not be financially viable to have an in-house occupational health or counselling team (EAPA & Work Foundation, 2016). The need for improved and practical advice and guidance found by this study indicates that there is an opportunity for occupational health service providers to work more closely with their clients to implement professional advice. Developing an in-house team to support managers in managing workplace stress and improving workplace well-being is another option open to employers.

The need for more peer and organisational support mechanisms for middle managers was something raised by the research participants. This is consistent with the views of IOSH & People Management (2019) and Hesketh & Cooper (2019) who recognise that managers need more support from their employers in tackling workplace stress. However, the participants in this study highlighted some specific support mechanisms that they felt would be useful in helping middle managers to improve the ways workplace stress is managed. Firstly, the participants said that formalised opportunities for peer support in sharing ideas and dealing with complex issues were needed. Creating opportunities for managers to establish dialogues as a way to impact on workplaces was discussed by Wall, Russell & Moore (2017), however this is not within the context of managing stress at work. While the concepts of peer support and learning are discussed in the wider literature on

organisational learning (Palmer & Blake, 2018), the deployment of informal peer-led learning and support in tackling workplace stress is currently underrepresented in the literature. Improved and sustained access to mentoring for managers was another mechanism that the participants suggested would be beneficial when tackling stress at work. The benefits of mentoring for managers are well documented in the literature, however the existing literature on deployment of mentoring for managers to support them in tackling employee stress at work is extremely limited.

Consistent with the literature, this research found that participants reported their position in between senior management and more junior colleagues as challenging (Hiekkataipale & Lamsa, 2019). The participants commonly reported how having to communicate difficult messages or news to staff and tenants was particularly challenging for them, especially in the current financial climate when the participants are equally affected by the news they are imparting. Some of the examples given in the social housing sector context related to restructuring and budget cuts. Participants also described how mediating between senior and junior colleagues was a source of tension for them, especially when enacting corporate strategy. Operationalising corporate strategy with increasingly limited resources while acting as a buffer for senior managers against operational issues were also reported as challenging. While this finding is broadly supportive of the existing literature and research, it also highlights some specific stressors that the participants experience (Wall & Bellamy, 2019) by virtue of their position in between and the sector in which they work. Sector-specific sources of stress at work are discussed further in the next section.

Organisational culture and behaviour were found to be sources of stress and tension for the participants. This finding is supportive of other studies that link organisational culture and behaviour with stress at work (Lee, Willis & Tan, 2018; LePine et al, 2016). It is interesting to note some of the nuanced findings of this research in the context of the participants' role in social housing, which go beyond the existing research into workplace stress. Witnessing the poor behaviour of colleagues and other managers was reported to be an issue for

participants who have had personal experience of mental ill health. This raises intriguing questions regarding the effect that personal experience of mental health issues has on the way managers are affected by the actions and behaviours of others in the workplace. Other tensions caused by organisational culture reported by the participants related to the impact that culture can have on delivering projects (Lock, 2017) and services and the extent to which culture can negatively impact on operationalising corporate strategy.

5.2 Emerging themes and new findings of this research

In this section, the new themes and findings of the research are discussed in further depth. Here, the emerging themes and new findings are considered to include those in areas which are counter to, question, or further elucidate what is already known in the wider literature.

5.2.1 How are middle managers managing the stress of others?

Looking for changes in behaviour was commonly described by the participants as a tactic they deployed to identify workers who are experiencing stress or need support at work. The existing literature on managing stress at work considered this to be a reactive approach to managing stress, and therefore ineffective approach to tackling stress at work. Despite the extant literature confirming the ineffectiveness of reactive approaches to managing stress experienced by workers, guidance for managers published by several professional bodies (e.g. IOSH & Management Today, 2019), describes the role of line managers in promoting mental well-being at work as predominantly reactive. For instance, the report published by IOSH & Management Today (2019, p.3) suggests (line) managers are well placed to *"spot the signs of poor mental health in the workplace"* and if they have the right skill set they can *"manage issues effectively before they reach crisis point".* While it is not yet clear whether such guidance influences the practices of middle managers, it is possible that guidance promoting reactive approaches and the use of reactive/tertiary interventions could be contributing to the increases in workplace stress being seen globally. It is argued here that this finding further illuminates the need for more training and practical guidance for middle managers on the application of the preventative approaches known to be most effective in managing stress at work.

This study found that the participants' personal experiences of mental ill health and the practices and behaviours of other managers influenced their own management style and how they support workers. The case for more training and guidance for managers has

already been made elsewhere in this chapter. However, this finding provides an insight into the practices of middle managers and how they learn and develop their skill set. There are similarities between the wider literature on the role of a leader's life story in the development of an authentic leadership style (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir, 2018) and how the participants are developing their own management style, albeit they are underrepresented in the context of this study. The concepts of organisational learning and knowledge sharing have also been establish in the wider literature, as has learning from the failures of other managers (Revens, 2017) and the role of peer learning (Palmer & Blake, 2018) among managers. The findings of this research indicate that more should be done to understand the role of these established models of personal, peer and organisational learning in relation to providing structured support, training and guidance for middle managers to improve the management of stress at work.

5.2.2 Organisational sources of stress, challenge or tension for middle managers in social housing

Strong associations between leadership, strategic direction and stress at work have been reported in the literature (Gulseren et al, 2019; CIPD, 2019) yet contrary to expectations, the finding of this study was inconclusive in relation to the experiences of the participants when discussing leadership and strategic direction in their organisations. Some of the participants reported very positive experiences and others negative experiences of leadership and direction at work. As such, this study has been unable to demonstrate a common theme in the responses of the participants. A possible explanation for this might be that those participants who reported positive experiences of leadership all work for the same social housing provider and so are referring to the same CEO, who may be a positive leader (Ellis, Bauer, Erdogan & Truxillo, 2018). Another possible explanation for this finding is that leadership and strategic direction within an organisation can be subjective and contextual (Western, 2019); therefore it might be reasonable to expect that research in this area will produce inconclusive and nuanced results.

Encouragingly, lack of authority and influence in strategic decision making was not found to be a common cause of stress for the participants of this study. This finding is contrary to the literature, which suggests that a lack of authority and influence over strategic decision making can be problematic for middle managers. However, with a small sample size and the mixed resources given, caution must be applied. Possible explanations for this finding are similar to those above in that participants who reported positive experiences influence strategic decision making and feel that they have the necessary authority to do their job. Another possible explanation for this finding is that experiences of individual managers within specific organisations can be subjective; therefore it might be reasonable to expect that research in this area will produce inconclusive and nuanced results.

Ethical and moral values as a source of workplace stress for social housing workers was a common theme during the interviews. While ethical and moral aspects of certain professions such as social work (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016) and nursing (McCarthy & Gastmans, 2015) have been discussed in wider literature, there is very little written about ethical and moral sources of stress faced by social housing workers. Examples of the moral and ethical dilemmas causing stress in the sector included providing services to vulnerable people at a time of funding and resources cuts in the sector, an issue that has been documented in the social work literature work (Mänttäri-van der Kuip, 2016). The Chartered Institute of Housing (2019) has developed a code of ethics for housing professionals to assist them in making ethical and moral decisions, recognising that social housing is a values-based profession. This finding highlights that more needs to be done to understand and reduce stress arising from the moral and ethical nature of social housing work.

Stress arising from ongoing restructuring and commercialisation in the social housing sector was found to be an issue for the participants. Mergers between social housing providers are reported to be increasingly common, with data reported by Joinson-Evans (2019) revealing there was a total of 42 mergers between housing associations in 2018. Their analysis further states that there have been 171 mergers of social housing providers in the past five years

alone and that mergers are being used as a way of cutting costs in response to reduced government spending on social housing. Poor management of change (Jensen, Flachs, Skakon, Rod & Bonde, 2018), expectations to deliver services with dwindling resources (Aronsson, Toivanen, Leineweber & Nyberg, 2018), and a conflict between the moral nature of social housing and commercialisation (Grady et al, 2018) were some of the reasons cited for the stress.

Setting up quasi-internal organisations such as in-house repairs and maintenance services, sometimes referred to as direct labour organisations (DLOs) is a model that many housing providers are adopting in order to cut costs and achieve value for money (National Federation of ALMOs, 2016). On paper, delivering these services in house should represent better value for money and improve productivity and customer satisfaction for social housing providers and their residents. However, this research indicates that this model has started to cause feelings of stress among participants who work for or with these in-house teams. Participants cited frustration and stress arising from challenging working relationships with colleagues because of the client-contractor relationship, ambiguity arising from running a commercial business within a not-for-profit organisation, role ambiguity and a sense of organisational injustice felt by some workers on the contractor side.

While housing associations might see restructuring and commercialisation as a means of responding to government funding cuts, Scanlon, Whitehead & Blanc (2017) suggest that mergers may not be the best solution, and that sometimes mergers are not done for the right reason. The wider literature emphasises the importance of good change management and risk assessment in tackling workplace stress arising from such projects. However, given the financial pressures on social housing providers and the increasing demands to become more commercial and responsive to tenants, it is possible that social housing providers did not have the necessary capacity and finance required to set up and mobilise a fully functional repairs and maintenance business. Nevertheless, there is a risk that the improvements in productivity, performance and value for money desired from bringing

these services in house will not be realised if action is not taken to better understand and tackle the related sources of stress at work.

A number of the internal sources of stress and pressure discussed in this section are as a result of social housing responding to external factors, such as changes in national policy and funding cuts. Even though these sources of stress emanate from outside the social housing providers, as employers they have a duty of care to protect the mental and physical health of their workers. The nature of the social housing sector is such that it is affected by changes in policy at local and national levels of government along with societal and other sector challenges.

5.2.3 External sources of workplace stress and challenges

This research found that the participants experience stress and pressure at work as a result of a range of factors that are not within the control of their organisations. Uncertainty because of government policy and changes in law was regularly described by the participants as a cause of stress to them and their colleagues. The impacts of rent and welfare reforms on organisations and their tenants were also cited. Increased pressure and workloads arising from greater regulatory oversight by the Regulator for Social Housing and renewed focus on the social housing providers' health and safety duties to their tenants were another source of stress at work discussed by the participants. Wider social and economic issues were causes of concern for many of the participants, especially when those issues affected their tenants and customers, of whom the participants spoke of with great fondness and commitment.

The notion that there are external factors that can cause workers stress is not new and has been cited in the wider literature. However, this research highlights a number of contemporary stressors in the context of social housing that are out of the control of social housing providers. In a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) operating

environment, corporate governance frameworks and procedures that ensure that psychosocial hazards and workplace stresses are an ongoing consideration will assist employers and their managers to respond to and mitigate the impact that internal and external factors have on their employees. However, it is argued here that decision makers, policy makers and lawmakers have a moral, and arguably legal, duty to assess the impacts of their undertakings on those who might be affected as a result of their actions. It could be argued that many of the negative consequences of national policy decisions described by participants were reasonably foreseeable, and that policy makers should have taken steps to counteract the effects of their policies on social housing tenants, workers and providers who have been most affected.

5.2.4 Anticipated sources of stress, challenge and tension for middle managers and workers in social housing

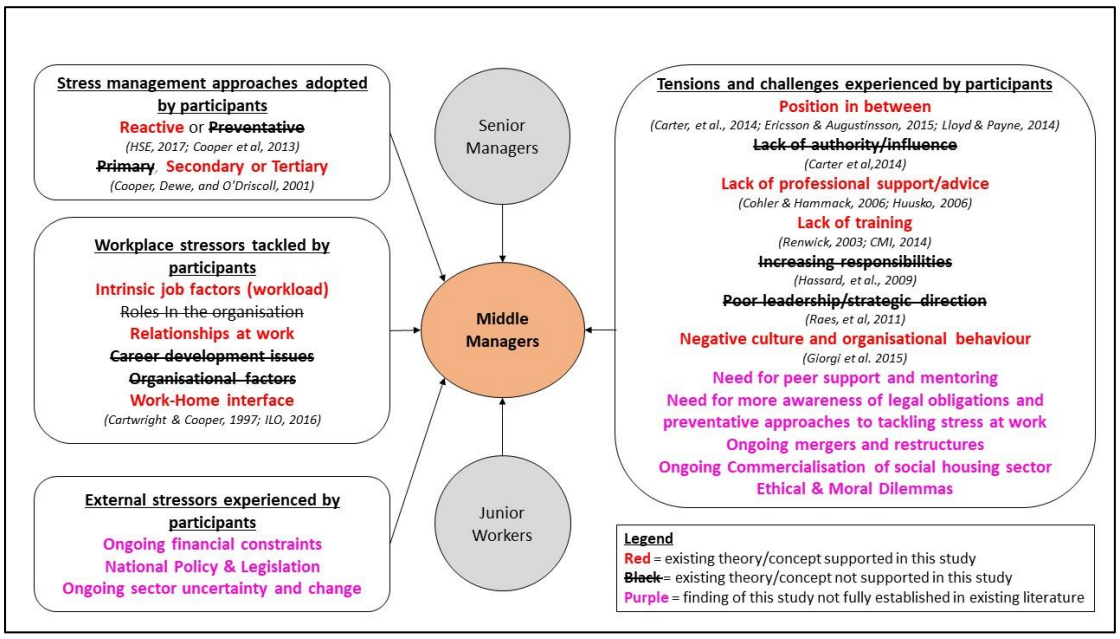
This study highlighted concerns the participants have for the future of social housing and the potential for increased stress and pressure in the sector. Many of these concerns relate to the ongoing financial constraints and national policy decisions affecting the sector, along with the resultant uncertainty that can arise. Furthermore, the participants cited the prospect of more mergers between social housing providers in response to the ongoing financial constraints and future changes in government policy as increasing the risk of stress in the sector because of increased workload, job insecurity and poorly managed change. Work-related stress arising from increased workload, job insecurity and change are well documented, as are the financial, human and organisational costs that can be incurred as result. Being able to anticipate and plan for future challenges and risks is important for ensuring organisational and individual resilience (Stokes et al, 2018). As such it is hoped that the anticipated challenges found during this study will prove useful to social housing providers in planning to meet the challenges facing the sector in the coming years.

The need for social housing providers to take a strategic, proactive risk-based approach to managing workplace stress has already been highlighted, as have the moral and arguably legal obligations of policy and lawmakers to identify and mitigate the risk of increased stress and mental health issues of those affected by their decisions. It could be argued that a co-ordinated approach between policy and lawmakers, sector bodies (e.g. the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation) and individual social housing providers is needed to reduce the impact of workplace stress in social housing. It is not disputed here that middle managers and front line housing staff have a role in tackling stress at work. On the contrary, it is argued that engaging with middle managers and front line workers in finding solutions and implementing sector policies will be critical in successful implementation of initiatives and change in the future. Moreover, engaging with and involving workers in meaningful and purposeful activities is found to improve workplace and societal well-being (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017; Hesketh & Cooper, 2019).

5.3 Implications of this research

In response to workplace stress rising sharply up the political and business agenda over the past 10 years, practice and guidance has shifted towards individual managers managing the stress of their workforce. Evidence suggests that middle managers, however, are in a complex and challenging position in between their superiors and more junior staff which exposes them to additional stressors that they are not always equipped to tackle. In the social housing sector in particular, evidence has found that 34 per cent of respondents said that they felt stressed much of the time and that 79 per cent felt stressed and unsupported by their managers. This research has explored how 17 middle managers in the social housing sector manage employee stress in practice and the findings have been presented in an updated version of the initial conceptual framework first presented in Chapter 2 (see Figure 2.1). The updated version of the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1: Updated conceptual framework – middle managers managing stress in social housing



This study found, in contrast to the extant literature outlined in Chapter 2, that participants predominantly adopted reactive approaches to tackling workplace stress and deployed secondary and tertiary stress management interventions to reduce the effects of stress at work (highlighted in red – top left side of Figure 5.1). Specifically, also in contrast to the literature, they tended to focus on managing stress arising from workload, relationships at work and home-work interface (highlighted in red - middle left side of Figure 5.1). The study also highlights a number of contemporary stressors in the context of social housing, such as the moral and ethical dilemmas of dealing with vulnerable tenants during a period of ongoing uncertainly, change and funding cuts in the sector (highlighted in purple – bottom left side of Figure 5.1). In addition, this study contributes new insights into how middle managers manage stress in practice such as using their experiences of managing their own stress at work and observing the behaviours and practices of other managers. These new insights have been incorporated in the tool for middle managers in social housing presented in Figure 5.2 which has been developed to support them in tackling workplace stress. It is hoped that the updated conceptual framework (Figure 5.1) and the tool to support middle managers in social housing tackle workplace stress (Figure 5.2) will prove useful to managers and their employers in improving the management of stress at work (Wall, 2017).

In addition to making a contribution to knowledge, professional doctoral research of this nature should have an impact on practice. Furthermore, the Chartered Association of Business Schools (2015) outline the value that business and management research projects can have in relation to social impact, responsible business, ethics, workplace well-being. They also highlight that the non-profit and public-sector organisations can also benefit from the shared research agenda which promotes the wider value of business research. Impactful research intended to add value across society and organisations will have implications for the research participants, their organisations, stakeholders, customers and the sectors within which they operate. The findings of this research suggest that, in addition to organisational sources of stress at work, there a number external factors (such as the UK's social housing model, government and fiscal policy, legislation, economic uncertainly,

societal problems, expectations and demands from stakeholders and tenants) that contribute to the pressure and stress experienced by middle managers and front line social housing workers.

This study has also offered new insights into how middle managers manage stress in practice, such as using their experiences of managing their own stress at work and observing the behaviours and practices of other managers. These new insights will be useful to middle managers in any sector in helping them to understand their role in relation to managing stress at work and in the development of their own management styles and practice. It could be argued that education providers and professional bodies for managers also have a role in developing standards and opportunities for middle managers to develop their knowledge and skills in tackling workplace stress. The findings of this research and the insights into the management practices of the participants could prove beneficial to education providers and professional bodies in developing learning interventions, courses and qualifications for managing workplace stress.

In addition to the implications of this research for the participants, the social housing sector and the wider academic community, this research has also impacted on my own practice as a researcher and practitioner in the field of health and safety. Starting with the impact on my own professional practice, conducting this research has provided insight into the complex issues and risks faced by my clients and their managers in the social housing sector. Possessing a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the sector has enabled me to approach how I engage with and support my clients with developing and implementing workplace stress policies and strategies. For instance, the findings of this research have proved invaluable when advising clients when restructuring their organisation and considering their options for delivering maintenance and construction activities.

Furthermore, the research process has influenced my practice as an educator and trainer of those working in both organisational health and well-being and social housing. I have been able to incorporate the wider literature and the emerging findings of this research in a new

qualification (Level 4 Certificate in Managing Workplace Stress and Well-being) that I have developed in partnership with the Open College Network West Midlands. This Ofqual regulated qualification has been developed for business leaders, directors, managers, campaigners and practitioners who want to learn more about proactively managing workplace stress as an organisational issue by developing and implementing organisational strategies. I identified the need for such a qualification while conducting this research as many of the training courses and qualifications available did not cover the strategic and preventative and approaches to managing workplace stress in any depth. Rather, they focused on reactive approaches to tackling individual cases of workplace stress.

Throughout my doctoral journey I have been given opportunities to develop my skills as an academic and professional writer. These opportunities have included co-writing two chapters on managing workplace stress for the encyclopaedia of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The opportunities to develop my writing skills alongside the research and development training received throughout the doctoral programme have allowed me to develop as a practitioner, researcher and academic thought leader. In the coming year I plan to write an article based on the findings of this research for a professional magazine and have been invited to talk about my research at a conference that coincides with International Stress Awareness Week 2020.

5.3.2 Recommendations arising from this research

Based upon the findings of this research, the following recommendations have been made for both middle managers and social housing providers (as employers) with the intention of improving how workplace stress in social housing is managed. These recommendations should be realistic and achievable because, as outlined in Chapters 1 & 2, taking a preventative and organisational approach to managing stress is both a legal requirement and can be more cost effective than the reactive, individual approaches found to be adopted during this research.

Recommendations for middle managers

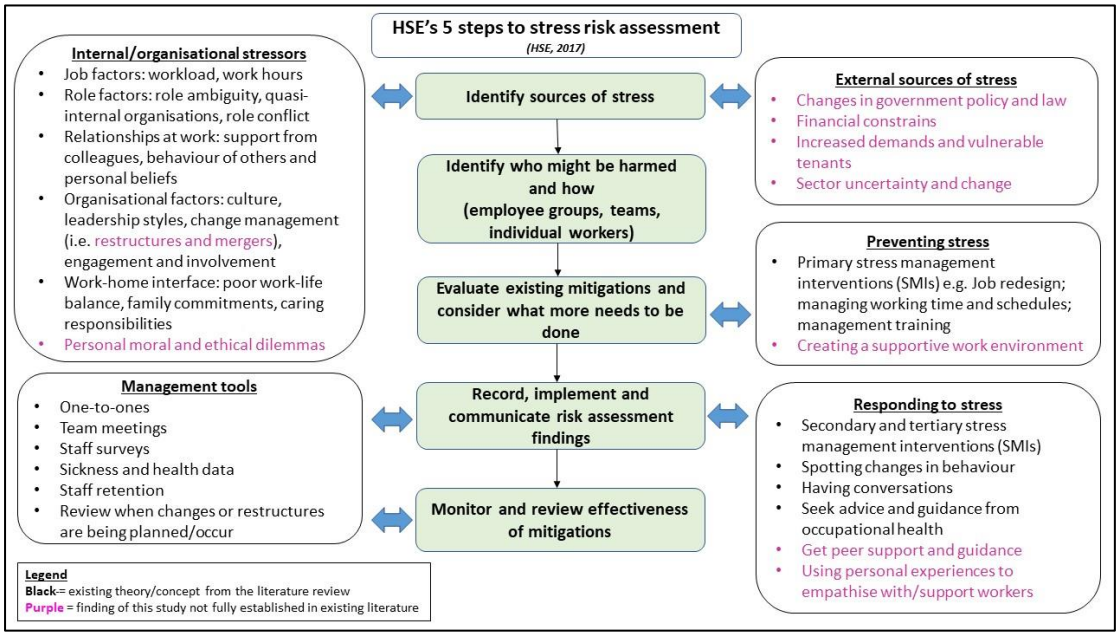
The findings of this research support the notion that middle managers have an important role to play in tackling stress at work and the promotion of positive mental health in the workplace. However, the findings also indicate that stress is being tackled in a reactive manner which focuses on individual workers when they are displaying symptoms of stress-related ill health. Based on the findings of this research and the established literature on workplace stress a number of recommendations are provided for middle managers to assist them in tackling stress at work.

Middle managers are encouraged to adopt a more preventative approach to tackling stress by applying the principles of risk assessment. The findings of this research indicate that middle managers are taking a predominantly reactive approach to tacking stress at work. These approaches are least effective because they do not deal with the sources of stress at work. Taking a more proactive approach to managing stress at work by identifying and mitigating stress at work through a process of risk assessment and good planning is known to be more effective.

Middle managers are encouraged to consider a range of sources of workplace stress when conducting risk assessments. This research found that participants focused on tackling three sources of workplace stress which result in other common sources of workplace stress not being considered. Furthermore, this research has highlighted a number of lesser known sources of workplace stress that affect social housing workers, such as moral and ethical dilemmas and external factors like government policy changes and funding cuts. It is therefore important that middle managers consider sources of stress that emanate from within their organisations as well as other, external sources of stress when conducting risk assessments and developing operational plans.

Based on the findings of this research, a tool has been developed to support middle managers in the social housing sector by adopting a more preventative risk-based approach to managing workplace stress (see Figure 5.2). The tool incorporates findings of this research, preventative approaches to managing stress at work outlined in the established literature and the risk assessment approach advocated by the HSE (2017). This combines examples of organisational and external workplace stressors that have been found by this research to exist in the social housing sector. Furthermore, the tool provides examples of preventative and reactive tactics that middle managers can deploy when attempting to manage stress at work. The tool for managers in Figure 5.2 will be incorporated in the Level 4 Certificate in Managing Workplace Stress Well-being that has been developed by the researcher.

Figure 5.2: Tool to support middle managers in social housing tackle workplace stress



Recommendations for social housing providers/employers

The literature and findings of this research illustrate the fundamental role that middle managers have to play in tackling stress at work and the promotion of positive mental health in the workplace. The findings also indicate that organisations need to take a more strategic and proactive approach to managing stress at work. The positive impact that middle managers could have on the well-being of the staff they manage is vast, and therefore it is vital they receive the best possible guidance, training and support from their employing organisations (IOSH & Management Today, 2019) to enable and empower them to play their part in tackling the growing issue of stress at work and champion positive mental health within the workplace. Based on the findings of this research and the established literature on workplace stress, the following recommendations are provided for employers/organisations.

Senior management have an important role to play in managing stress at work and they need to demonstrate their commitment to tackling workplace stress (British Standards Institution, 2011). The research participants made very little reference to corporate stress management policies, strategies or procedures during their interviews, and therefore senior management are strongly encouraged to demonstrate and formalise their commitment to reducing stress at work by developing and implementing a corporate stress management policy and strategy. The policy and strategy documents should embed the principles of preventative risk-based approaches to managing workplace stress throughout all strategic and operational management processes and the effectiveness of the policy should be monitored carefully.

Employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and take action to reduce the causes for stress at work (HSE, 2017). As such senior management should consider the causes of workplace stress when make strategic decisions and developing business plans. The findings of this research suggest that mergers

and restructures in social housing are a source of stress for middle managers and workers. Therefore, senior management and board members are strongly encouraged to identify and mitigate workplace stress arising from major organisation change projects (e.g. mergers and restructuring) and when developing new and commercial services. This research also highlights a number of sources of workplace stress that affect social housing workers. These include moral and ethical dilemmas (CIH, 2019) and external factors such as government policy changes and funding cuts affecting the sector. Social housing employers are therefore urged to consider sector-specific stressors and the impact of external factors on the mental health and well-being of workers.

This research found that middle managers need access to improved training and development opportunities to enable them to tackle stress at work and assist the organisation comply with their legal duty of care to workers. Employers are, therefore, strongly encouraged provide further training and development to middle managers (CIPD & Simply Health, 2019) on the application of preventative approaches to tackling workplace stress. Furthermore, social housing providers and their representative bodies are encouraged to work together to develop training and development opportunities in managing stress at work for managers in the social housing sector. Such training could be based upon the tool that has been developed to support middle manager in social housing tackle workplace stress (Figure 5.2) which has been informed by this research and the wider literature discussed in this chapter and the literature review (Chapter 2).

More detailed advice, practical guidance and support from occupational health teams and other professionals on managing workplace stress cases is needed. Employers are strongly encouraged to work with their occupational health, health and safety and human resources teams to put in place arrangements for the provision of more detailed, practical professional advice and guidance for senior management, middle managers and practitioners when supporting workers experiencing work-related and other mental illnesses. The need for improved access to opportunities for structured peer support and

organisational learning for middle managers within the organisation was also highlighted during this research. As such, employers are encouraged to provide and promote opportunities for middle managers to access peer support and organisational learning activities that assist them in managing workplace stress.

5.4 Limitations and future research

While this research makes a number of contributions to knowledge and practice, it is also important to note the limitations of this study (Bryman, 2016). This research was developed from a literature review that informed an initial theoretical framework. As such, this research commenced on the assumption that certain aspects of stress management and middle management theory should be focused on – these characteristics defined the study's boundaries (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). While it is recognised that prior theorising can increase the risk of the researcher making their own connections that may inhibit the discovery of unexpected findings, the research proceeded on the basis that the philosophy, design and methodologies that reflected the aim and objectives of the research would reduce the risk of researcher bias (Cunliffe, 2010). A considerable amount of the stress management and middle management literature subscribes to positivist traditions that often discount personal experience (e.g. Pindek et al, 2018); and as such this research has been conducted with the intention of exploring the personal experiences of the participants through interpretation rather than statistical analysis (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Further interpretive research of this nature is encouraged to improve our understanding of workplace stress management practices.

This study does not make any claims about presenting a generalised or conclusive picture of the experiences of middle managers in social housing and the relatively small purposive sample of participants limits the representativeness and transferability of the findings (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, it is generally accepted that participants' positions in different organisations and different points in time can shift (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This should also be expected when participants come from varied professional backgrounds with a range of skills, experience and different levels of management and leadership training. The findings of this study are limited, as it deliberately explored the experiences of middle managers in relation to managing workplace stress in social housing, where a gap in research was identified and this is not intended to be representative of all middle managers

or transferable to other sectors (Silverman, 2015). While the findings of this study have revealed similarities between the participants and need to be considered within the context of the research, this does not mean that findings are irrelevant to other settings. Further research looking at middle managers' experiences of managing workplace stress in similar sectors (such as in the NHS, education, policing and local authorities and social care) is encouraged.

A further limitation results from the dynamic nature of the semi-structure interview, wherein middle managers chose what they wanted to speak about and share (Kvale, 1999). Participants may have organised their own reality by selecting perceptions and experiences that were significant and relevant to them at that particular moment in time. It is also possible that the participants' responses may have also been biased by selective memory (Hill et al, 2018), because some events may not have seemed significant to them, or because the reflecting on the events might cause them anxiety. Conversely, the interview process seems to have encouraged some of the participants to reflect on experiences that may have otherwise remained unnoticed or forgotten. It is also possible that the participants could have responded according to what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. However, the research methodologies deployed and conduct of the semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to probe and question more thoroughly if they believed the participant was saying what they thought was expected of them. The use of similar methodologies in research exploring similar topics is therefore encouraged.

5.5 Conclusions

This research has explored how middle managers manage employee stress in practice. This study has been undertaken by conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews with 17 middle managers in the social housing sector and has found, in contrast to the extant literature, that participants predominantly adopted reactive approaches to tackling workplace stress, and deployed secondary and tertiary stress management interventions to reduce the effects of stress at work. Specifically, and also in contrast to the literature, (e.g. HSE, 2017), they tended to focus on managing stress arising from workload, relationships at work and home-work interface. In addition, this study contributes new insights into how middle managers manage stress in practice, such as using their experiences of managing their own stress at work and observing the behaviours and practices of other managers. The study also highlights contemporary stressors in the context of social housing, such as the moral and ethical dilemmas of dealing with vulnerable tenants during a period of ongoing uncertainly, change and funding cuts in the sector. As such, these contributions provide new, practical insights into how managers can manage stress in the workplace and highlight further opportunities for research in this area (Bansal et al, 2018).

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

No.	Objective	Questions	Key concepts
N/A	Introductions	Tell me a bit about you and your role here.	For example: Where you sit within the organisation. How many staff you manage. Your professional background/experience. Management training/development received. Length of time as a manager
1 a	How do middle managers approach managing the stress of others?	Can you tell me about how you approach managing the stress of others?	Reactive or preventative and individual or collective *(HSE, 2017; Cooper et al, 2013)*
1 b	What do middle managers do to help prevent stress in their position?	What do you do to help prevent stress in your position? What do you do when stress appears?	Primary/Secondary/Tertiary SMIs *(Cooper, Dewe, and O'Driscoll, 2001)* **Specific workplace stressors:** Intrinsic job factors; Roles In the organization; Relationships at work; Career development issues; Organisational factors; Work-Home interface. *(Cartwright & Cooper, 1997; ILO, 2016)*
1 c	What influences the approaches that middle managers take to preventing the stress of others?	Can you tell me more about why you take that approach? Tell me about some of the tensions/challenges in managing stress in your position. What about the resources, advice, and guidance available…? What about the scope of your role in influence on wider things such as organisational strategy and planning? Can you foresee any upcoming sector changes that might affect how you manage stress at work?	The middle manager's tensions in managing stress: Position in between *(Carter, et al., 2014; Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015; Lloyd & Payne, 2014);* Lack of authority/influence *(Carter et al, 2014);* Limited access to professional support/advice *(Cohler & Hammack, 2006; Huusko, 2006);* Lack of training *(Renwick, 2003; CMI, 2014);* Increasing responsibilities *(Hassard, et al., 2009);* Poor leadership/strategic direction *(Raes, et al, 2011)*; Negative culture and organisational behaviour *(Giorgi et al. 2015)*

Appendix B – Participant Information & Consent Form

Participant Information Document

The experiences of middle managers in social housing in tackling workplace stress experienced by others.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of middle managers in tackling workplace stress in order to improve management practice.

A written report will be produced at the end of the project. The findings from the study will be used to inform and further enhance how workplace stress is managed.

Why have I been chosen?

You have responded to a call for participants from the professional community of middle managers working in the social housing sector.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect the standard of care you receive in any way.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. You will then be contacted by the researcher from the Chester Business School and invited to attend a meeting during which the aims and objectives of the project will be explained and your questions answered. You will then be interview to discuss your role and experience of managing workplace stress. The interview will be recorded on a Dictaphone for the purposes of accurately transcribing your experiences. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to check that you that it is accurate. None of the managers involved in this project will be identifiable in the final report.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is likely that there are no disadvantages or risks foreseen in taking part in the study. However, some people may be reminded of uncomfortable circumstances that they have faced as a manager.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You may be able to identify ways in which you might be able to better influence management practice or organisational procedures in relation to mental health and stress at work.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Professor Clare Schofield
Chair of Faculty Research & Knowledge Transfer Committee
Faculty of Business & Management, University of Chester, United Kingdom, Chester CH1 4BJ
+44 (0)1244 511000 or c.schofield@chester.ac.uk

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence (but not otherwise), then you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for this.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information. Participants should note that data collected from this project may be retained and published in an anonymised form. By agreeing to participate in this project, you are consenting to the retention and publication of data.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be written up into a report for the funders of the research. It is hoped that the findings may be used to improve the support provided to individual manager and as a result further enhance their professional practice. Individuals who participate will not be identified in any subsequent report or publication.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is funded by the researcher. The researcher, from the Faculty of Business Enterprise & Lifelong Learning, is organising and carrying out the study.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact: Matthew Parkyn by email: 0919367@chester.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Participant Informed Consent Form

Title of Project: Managers Managing Stress at Work: Exploring the experiences of managers managing employee stress in the social housing sector.

Name of Researcher:

Please initial box

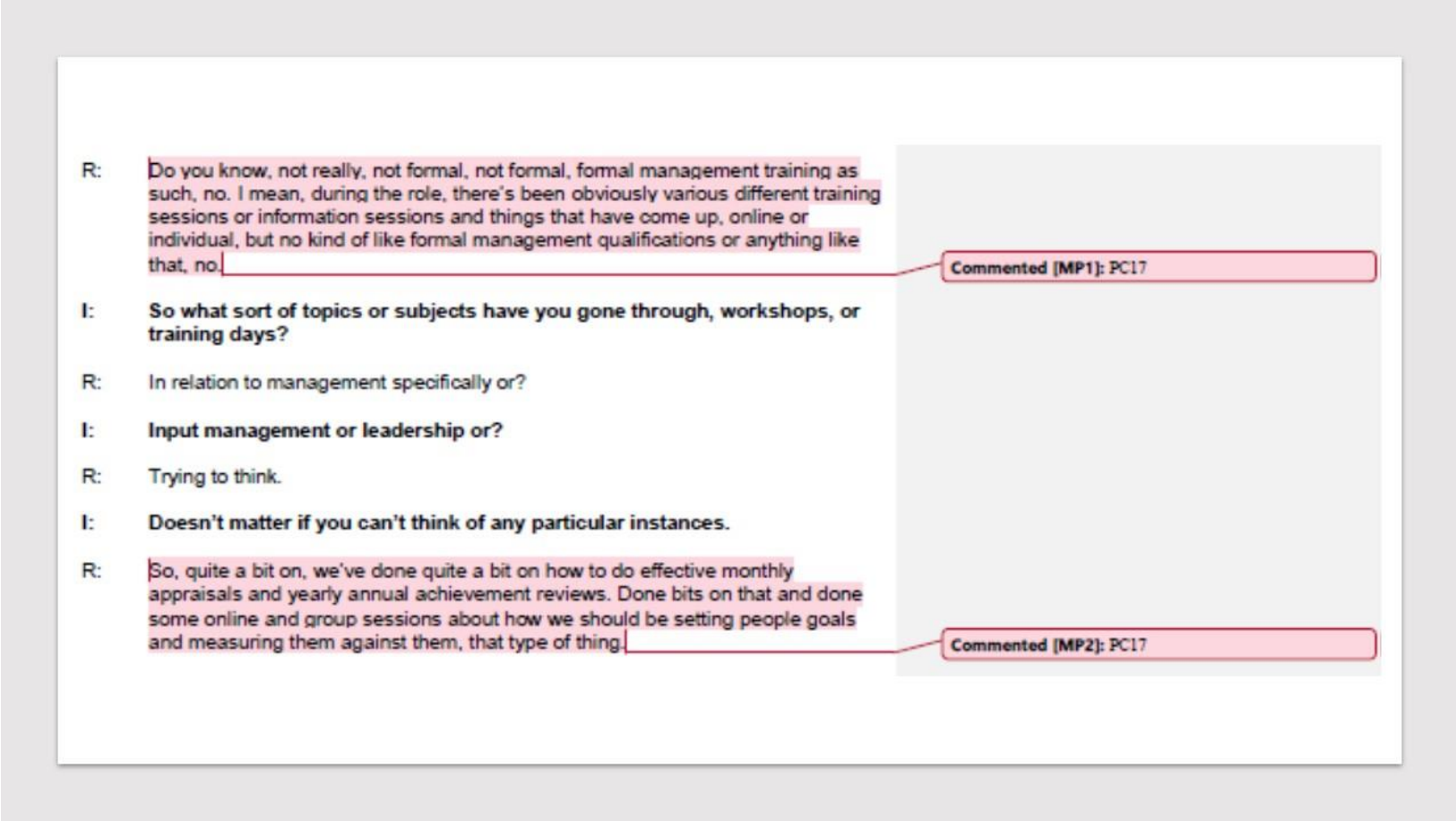
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet (above) for this study, I am a middle manager with recent experience of working in the social housing sector and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Person taking consent (if different from researcher)	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix C – Example of interview transcript coding



R: Do you know, not really, not formal, not formal, formal management training as such, no. I mean, during the role, there's been obviously various different training sessions or information sessions and things that have come up, online or individual, but no kind of like formal management qualifications or anything like that, no.

Commented [MP1]: PC17

I: **So what sort of topics or subjects have you gone through, workshops, or training days?**

R: In relation to management specifically or?

I: **Input management or leadership or?**

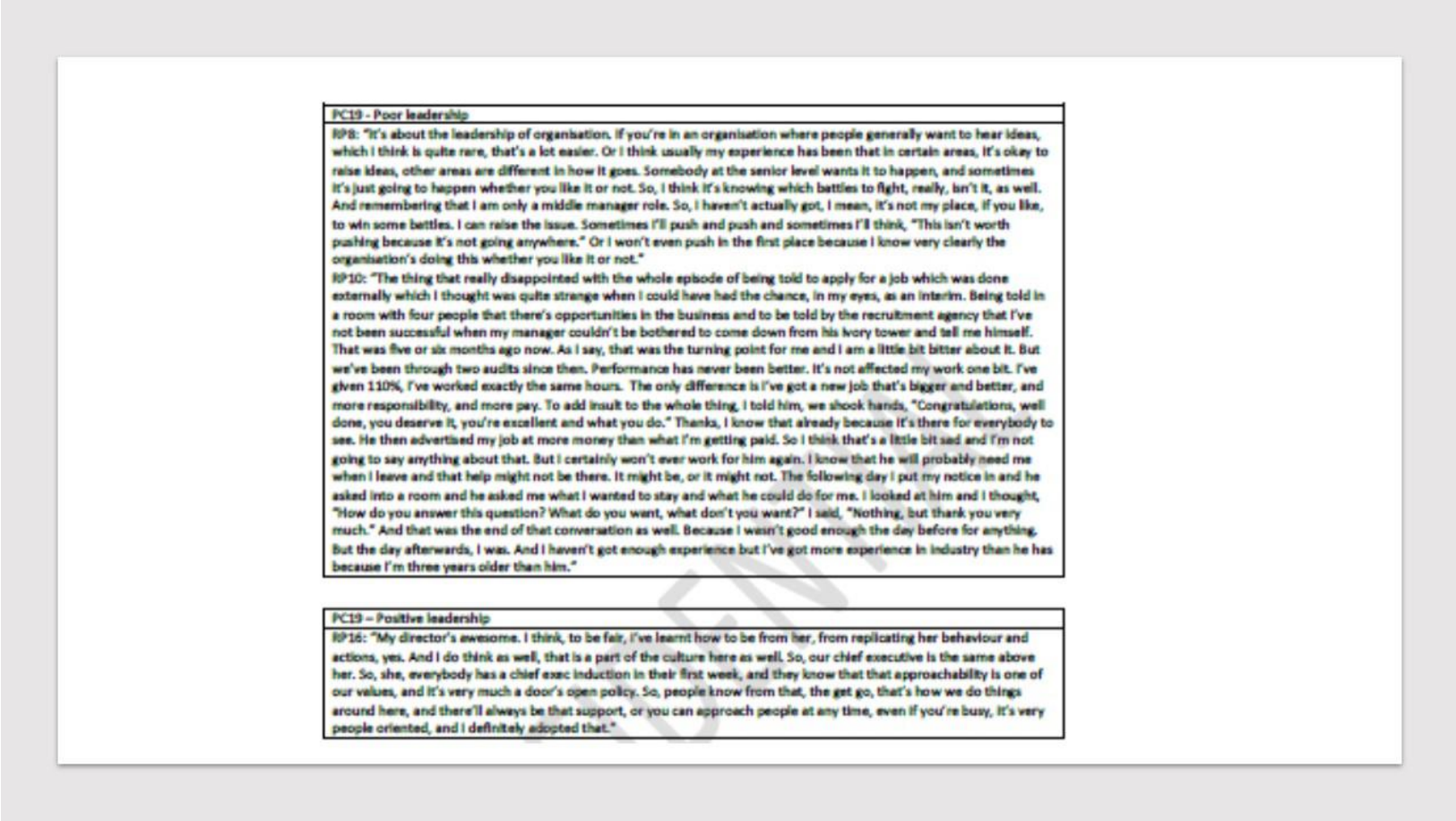
R: Trying to think.

I: **Doesn't matter if you can't think of any particular instances.**

R: So, quite a bit on, we've done quite a bit on how to do effective monthly appraisals and yearly annual achievement reviews. Done bits on that and done some online and group sessions about how we should be setting people goals and measuring them against them, that type of thing.

Commented [MP2]: PC17

Appendix D - Example of coding table used to collate common themes



PC19 - Poor leadership
RP8: "It's about the leadership of organisation. If you're in an organisation where people generally want to hear ideas, which I think is quite rare, that's a lot easier. Or I think usually my experience has been that in certain areas, it's okay to raise ideas, other areas are different in how it goes. Somebody at the senior level wants it to happen, and sometimes it's just going to happen whether you like it or not. So, I think it's knowing which battles to fight, really, isn't it, as well. And remembering that I am only a middle manager role. So, I haven't actually got, I mean, it's not my place, if you like, to win some battles. I can raise the issue. Sometimes I'll push and push and sometimes I'll think, "This isn't worth pushing because it's not going anywhere." Or I won't even push in the first place because I know very clearly the organisation's doing this whether you like it or not." RP10: "The thing that really disappointed with the whole episode of being told to apply for a job which was done externally which I thought was quite strange when I could have had the chance, in my eyes, as an interim. Being told in a room with four people that there's opportunities in the business and to be told by the recruitment agency that I've not been successful when my manager couldn't be bothered to come down from his ivory tower and tell me himself. That was five or six months ago now. As I say, that was the turning point for me and I am a little bit bitter about it. But we've been through two audits since then. Performance has never been better. It's not affected my work one bit. I've given 110%, I've worked exactly the same hours. The only difference is I've got a new job that's bigger and better, and more responsibility, and more pay. To add insult to the whole thing, I told him, we shook hands, "Congratulations, well done, you deserve it, you're excellent and what you do." Thanks, I know that already because it's there for everybody to see. He then advertised my job at more money than what I'm getting paid. So I think that's a little bit sad and I'm not going to say anything about that. But I certainly won't ever work for him again. I know that he will probably need me when I leave and that help might not be there. It might be, or it might not. The following day I put my notice in and he asked into a room and he asked me what I wanted to stay and what he could do for me. I looked at him and I thought, "How do you answer this question? What do you want, what don't you want?" I said, "Nothing, but thank you very much." And that was the end of that conversation as well. Because I wasn't good enough the day before for anything. But the day afterwards, I was. And I haven't got enough experience but I've got more experience in industry than he has because I'm three years older than him."

PC19 – Positive leadership
RP16: "My director's awesome. I think, to be fair, I've learnt how to be from her, from replicating her behaviour and actions, yes. And I do think as well, that is a part of the culture here as well. So, our chief executive is the same above her. So, she, everybody has a chief exec induction in their first week, and they know that that approachability is one of our values, and it's very much a door's open policy. So, people know from that, the get go, that's how we do things around here, and there'll always be that support, or you can approach people at any time, even if you're busy, it's very people oriented, and I definitely adopted that."

Appendix E – Overview thematic coding matrix table (all themes and codes)

Objective 1																	
Theme	**Code**	**RP1**	**RP2**	**RP3**	**RP4**	**RP5**	**RP6**	**RP7**	**RP8**	**RP9**	**RP10**	**RP11**	**RP12**	**RP13**	**RP14**	**RP15**	**RP16**	**RP17**
Preventative Approach	PC1																	
Reactive Approach	PC2	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Collective Focus	PC3																	
Individual Focus	PC4	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Objective 2																		
Theme	**Code**	**RP1**	**RP2**	**RP3**	**RP4**	**RP5**	**RP6**	**RP7**	**RP8**	**RP9**	**RP10**	**RP11**	**RP12**	**RP13**	**RP14**	**RP15**	**RP16**	**RP17**
Primary SMIs	PC5																	
Secondary SMIs	PC6		√	√					√									
Tertiary SMIs	PC7		√	√	√	√		√	√			√	√	√			√	
Deals with stress from intrinsic job factors	PC8				√									√		√		
reduces role related/stress uncertainty	PC9													√		√		
Encourages positive relationships at work	PC10		√	√	√			√	√	√	√	√	√			√		
Tackles career Development Issues	PC11		√															
Organisational Factors	PC12									√								
Manages work-home interface	PC13		√		√				√	√		√			√	√		
Positive management of change	ET1		√		√											√		

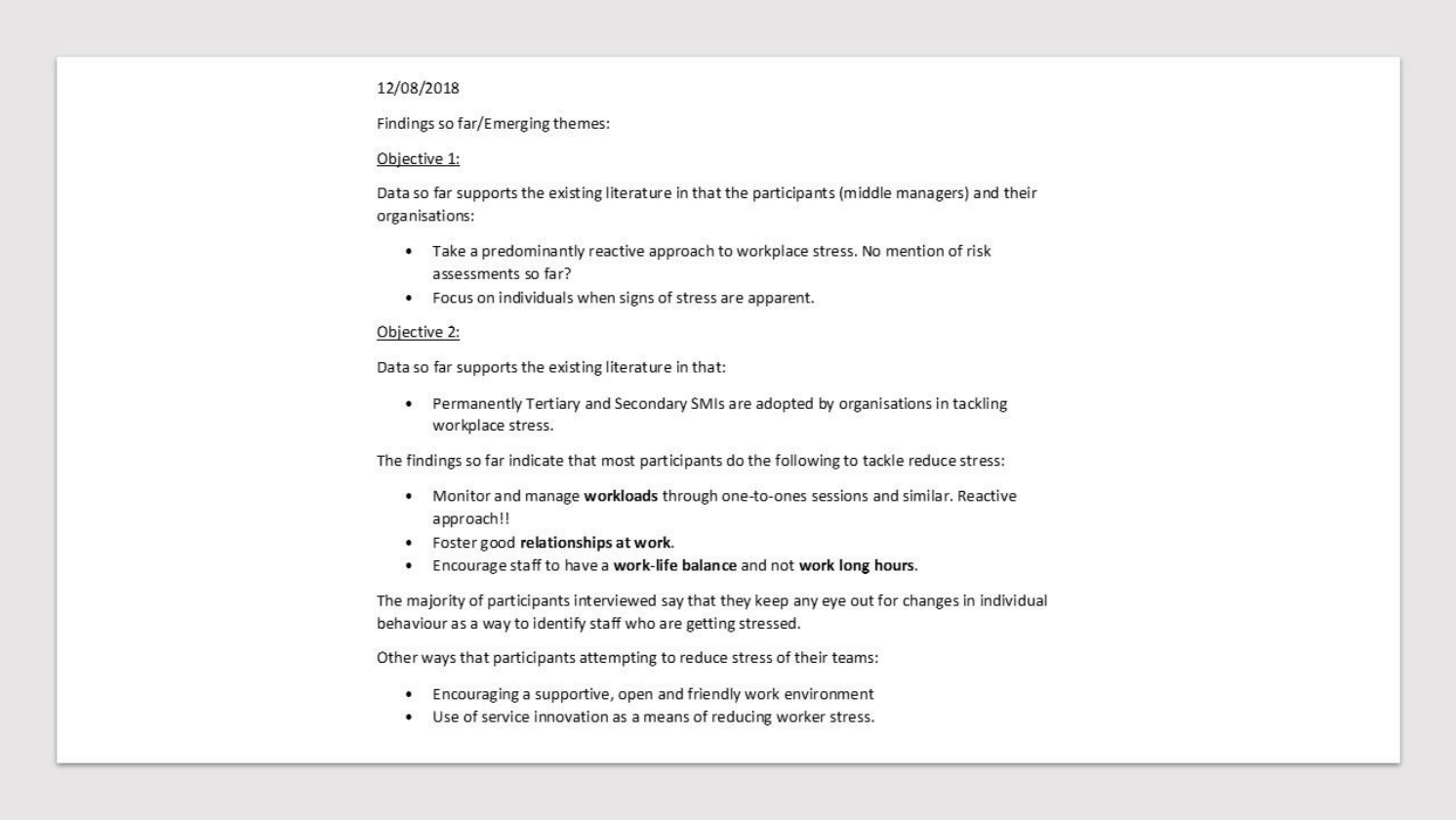
Actively manages workload to reduce	ET2	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Looks for behavioural changes that indicate staff are stressed.	ET12	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Encourages supportive, fair and open work environment as a way of reducing stress	ET13	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√			√	√	
Uses service innovation as a means to reduce stress.	ET20						√		√	√	√	√						
Objective 3																		
Theme	**Code**	**RP1**	**RP2**	**RP3**	**RP4**	**RP5**	**RP6**	**RP7**	**RP8**	**RP9**	**RP10**	**RP11**	**RP12**	**RP13**	**RP14**	**RP15**	**RP16**	**RP17**
Position in-between	PC14	√			√			√	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	
Lack of authority/influence	PC15	√	X	X					X	X					√		X	
Limited access to professional support/advice	PC16					√			√				√		√		√	
Lack of training for managers	PC17		√	X		√	√		√			√	√		√		X	
Increasing responsibilities	PC18						√					√	√		√	√	√	
Poor leadership leadership/strategic direction	PC19			X				√	√	X	√				√	√	X	√
Negative culture and individual behaviours	PC20		√					√	√	√	√			√		√		√

Financial Constraints	ET3	√	√		√	√	√		√			√		√		√	√	√
Increased demand from vulnerable tenants	ET4			√			√	√	√	√		√		√				
Being undervalued	ET5		√					√			√							
Government Policy causing stress	ET6	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	
Uncertainty – sector + organisational	ET7	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√		√	√
Experiences of good/bad managers has influenced management style.	ET8	√	√	√	√				√	√	√	√			√			√
Personal experience of mental illness has informed management practice.	ET9	√	√	√								√						
Decrease in local health and social service provision.	ET10						√		√			√						
Lack of mentoring/support for middle mgrs, safe space to reflect, discuss complex issues and do quality work.	ET11	√	√	√		√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	
The in-house contractor/client relationship as a source of pressure and stress.	ET14		√		√						√					√		√
Poor organisational comms/negative messaging	ET15		√			√			√		√			√			√	

Responding to Government Policy and Financial by restructuring and commercialisation of social housing organisations	ET16	√	√	√	√	√		√	√		√		√	√		√	√	√
Moral duty to tenants	ET17	√	√							√	√	√						
Application of HR policy in negative way	ET18		√			√	√											
Mental ill ness stigma/lack of awareness	ET19	√	√				√							√			√	
Sector doesn't look after it's staff to the same extent as it's customers.	ET21	√							√									
Lack of line management support and the expectation to 'just get on with it' as a source of pressure for middle managers.	ET22	√									√		√		√		√	
Ongoing restructures responding to funding cuts/government policy.	ET23			√		√		√			√		√	√			√	
Universal Credit & other Welfare system changes	ET24	√										√					√	√
Upcoming Housing Green Paper	ET25	√				√				√		√		√				
Regulator for Social Housing	ET26	√						√		√								

Ongoing financial constraints and mergers	ET27		√						√			√	√				√	√
Growing focus on statutory compliance	ET28		√				√	√			√				√			√

Appendix F - Extract from researcher's journal entry



12/08/2018

Findings so far/Emerging themes:

Objective 1:

Data so far supports the existing literature in that the participants (middle managers) and their organisations:

- Take a predominantly reactive approach to workplace stress. No mention of risk assessments so far?
- Focus on individuals when signs of stress are apparent.

Objective 2:

Data so far supports the existing literature in that:

- Permanently Tertiary and Secondary SMIs are adopted by organisations in tackling workplace stress.

The findings so far indicate that most participants do the following to tackle reduce stress:

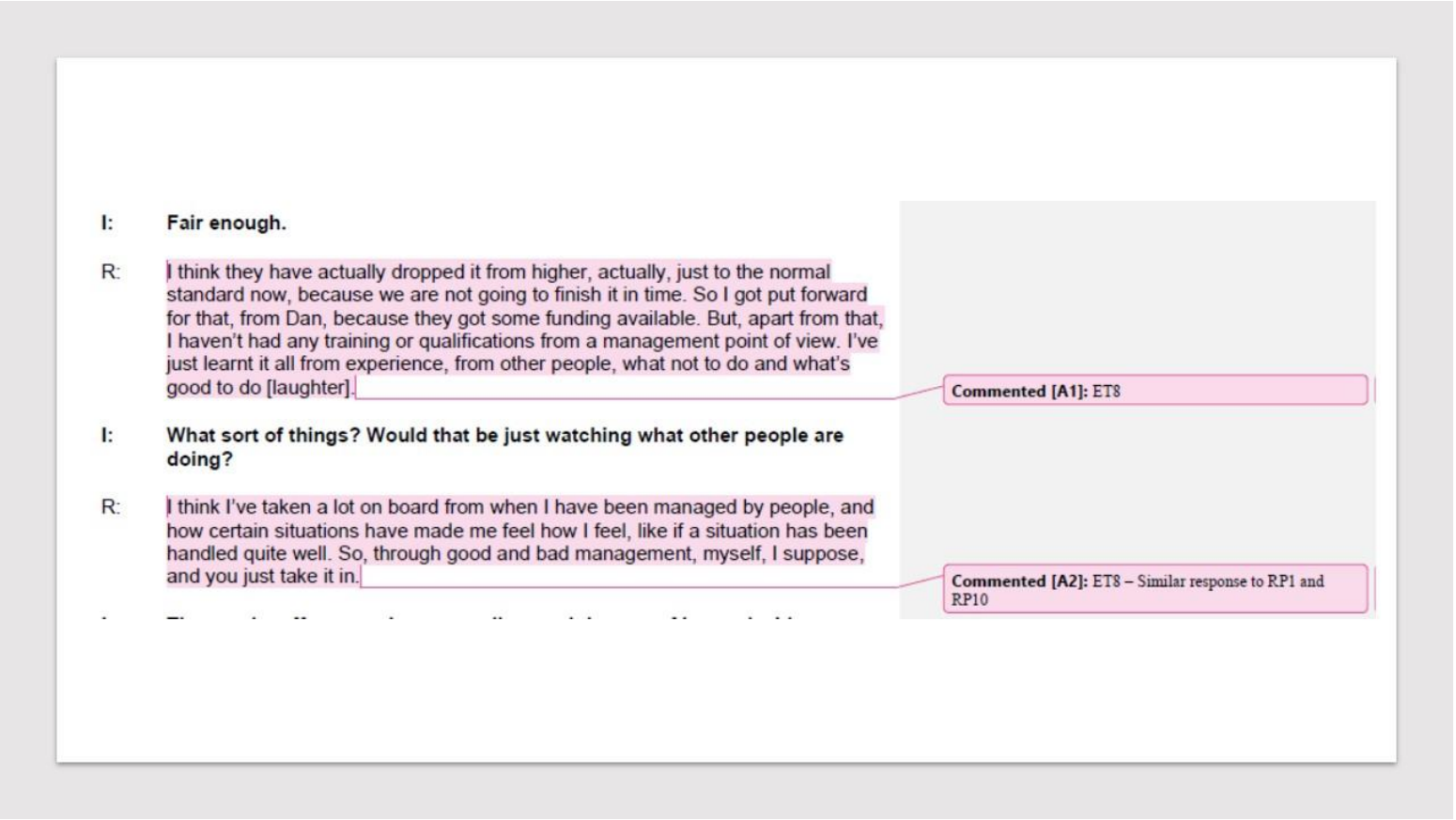
- Monitor and manage **workloads** through one-to-ones sessions and similar. Reactive approach!!
- Foster good **relationships at work**.
- Encourage staff to have a **work-life balance** and not **work long hours**.

The majority of participants interviewed say that they keep any eye out for changes in individual behaviour as a way to identify staff who are getting stressed.

Other ways that participants attempting to reduce stress of their teams:

- Encouraging a supportive, open and friendly work environment
- Use of service innovation as a means of reducing worker stress.

Appendix G – Example of reviewing evidence of the interpretive choices made with regard to analysis and coding of transcript data



I: **Fair enough.**

R: I think they have actually dropped it from higher, actually, just to the normal standard now, because we are not going to finish it in time. So I got put forward for that, from Dan, because they got some funding available. But, apart from that, I haven't had any training or qualifications from a management point of view. I've just learnt it all from experience, from other people, what not to do and what's good to do [laughter].

Commented [A1]: ET8

I: **What sort of things? Would that be just watching what other people are doing?**

R: I think I've taken a lot on board from when I have been managed by people, and how certain situations have made me feel how I feel, like if a situation has been handled quite well. So, through good and bad management, myself, I suppose, and you just take it in.

Commented [A2]: ET8 – Similar response to RP1 and RP10